

4-1-1977

## Blackness: A Distorted Concept

Festus C. Okafor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

---

### Recommended Citation

Okafor, Festus C. (1977) "Blackness: A Distorted Concept," *New Directions*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 12.  
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol4/iss3/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@howard.edu](mailto:digitalservices@howard.edu).

# Blackness

42

## A Distorted Concept

By Festus C. Okafor

The Western man, both for reason of his survival and for the embellishments thereof, has used his ingenuity to effectively put across certain concepts in such a way that they conjure certain impressions—sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly—depending on the dictates of pragmatism in the context of his intentions.

Although Blackness (just as whiteness) is a *neutral color concept* in its originality, it has since been distorted to assume negative implications while, on the contrary, whiteness has been projected to assume positive character. There is no concept system thrust upon man by nature. Therefore, all the attitudinal paraphernalia (negative or positive) evident in the conceptualization and application of these "neutral stimuli" are man-made.

It is known that an attitude consists of the meanings or significance that one associates with a certain object or abstraction which influence one's degree of acceptance or rejection of that object or abstraction. It is known too that an attitude toward an experiential or metaphysical object can be manipulated and modified. And this, obviously, includes such an abstraction as blackness.

There are various techniques for manipulation or modification of attitudes and concomitant behaviors. These are popularly known in contemporary psychology as *conditioning techniques*.

In the complex system of domination and exploitation, the Western man has used a monumental array of complex and sophisticated conditioning techniques geared toward the glorification of whiteness and the white man, and the debasement of blackness and the Black man. This colossal apparatus of conditioning against the Black man has yielded prodigious results. It has not only debased the Black man in the considerations of a great many people, but has also cast aspersions on the very *quality of blackness*. It has

and condition. A condition of existence and intellection has become inevitably attached to the color of the skin, in great many facets of contemporary man's way of life.

The question that comes to mind is this: How did the Western man achieve this feat of conditioning against blackness on the one hand, and the establishment of the white mystique on the other? To give a clear response to this question would be difficult, especially within the framework of this article. Nevertheless, for purposes of insights, the following fragments would be useful:

The Western man had for many centuries comparatively good internal cohesion. He had cooperative development of culture because of favorable environmental factors and less diversified language systems, unlike Africa which has been characterized as the Babel of the world (Africa as a whole has almost 1,000 separate languages). In effect, the Western man was able to share and enjoy the benefits of individual and group discoveries, achievements and inventions, and to accelerate progress by building on them.

With this substratum, when the Western man confronted the Black man in Africa centuries ago, the Western man was in a better position to take advantage of the situation. There was a rapid systematic polarization of the races, followed by properly orchestrated and protracted conditioning which portrayed the white man as *the hero* and the Black man as *the villain*. As the development of the communications media gathered momentum, the Western man demonstrated no scruples in effecting biased approach to things Black—biased reporting against the character, condition and achievements of the Black man.

Since the regularity of bias is very effective in forming images of other peoples and attitudes towards them, numerous people across the globe actually began to internalize that Black people are not different from, but inferior to, white

people. This conceptualization, among other things, gave rise to racial segregation and the monster of Apartheid.

Because of the congenial atmosphere created by the absence of any meaningful challenge to the denigration of blackness, some psychologists have even assumed the audacity to attack the capacity of black intelligence. These psychologists such as Arthur Jensen of the University of California, William Shockley of Stanford University and Richard Herrnstein of Harvard University, have put in print the preposterous assumption that Blacks have inferior minds to whites.

In his effort to debase blackness and to condition the Black man to accept inferiority, the Western man has associated blackness with things negative and dishonorable. For instance, he teaches that *the Devil is black* and *the Angels are white*. He uses "black" as *prefix* to portray *negative* concepts and situations so as to make "black" look "ugly" and "white" beautiful, by implication. Consider such concepts as: black book, blacklist, black hearted, blackleg, Black Hand, Black Hole, black magic, black mark, black measles, Black Bag job, black market, black sheep, blackmail. Africa itself has for a long time been labeled in many Western geography books as the "Dark Continent."

The Western man has done a good job in this conditioning enterprise. Even in Africa, people have been successfully "brainwashed" into accepting Black inferiority. Until recently, beauty, goodness and good quality were often associated with the white man. Not infrequently, for example, a Nigerian would purchase a product with a "Made in England" label rather than the one with a "Made in Nigeria" label, even if the Nigerian product were superior in quality and less in price. The same is true in many other African countries where manufacturing industry is becoming a reality. There had been numerous instances among African governments of job discrimination in favor of Europeans, even when the Black competitor

ors were much more qualified for the position.

The conditioning was so successful that Blacks, over the years, developed negative self concept and inferiority complex. For millions of Black Americans, Africa became a *terra incognita*, an unknown entity, a forgotten continent. Unlike the English Americans, the French Americans, the German Americans, the Italian Americans and the Jewish Americans, they made little or no effort to explore, discover, and project the positive aspects and the distinctive qualities and values of their cultural heritage, as though the land of their roots were a cultural *tabula rasa*, analogous to the Nebuchadnezzian giant with the feet of clay or the Horacian *vox praeterita nihil* (a mere "talking drum").

In view of the negativism, it becomes abundantly evident that the contemporary Black man, particularly the Black scholar, has a serious task to confront. He must untangle, extricate, redefine and project the real meaning and significance of blackness through *counterconditioning*. To accomplish this, there must be a cooperative and coordinated effort between the Black educator and the layman.

In the early 1900s, Dr. J. K. Aggrey, a famous Black educator from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), having been engulfed by the black negativism of the time, thundered: "I am proud of my color. He who is not proud of his color is not fit to live." But this, then, was like a voice crying in the wilderness. Now the time is ripe for a coordinated effort.

As already stated, in the domain of color characterization, blackness is a neutral color concept in its originality. But what about the people with this complexion?

In historical perspective, it is clear that Black people, within the proper context of environmental factors and the socio-economic conditions, never lacked in lofty human qualities in terms of high-powered intellect, physical power, civility, or metaphysical character. It must be remembered that Black ancestors in Africa

opment of aesthetic cultural artifacts. The genius of the Ife artifacts and the creativity of Dogon and Bambara pre-date the originality of modernists from Gauguin to Picasso.

Furthermore, one cannot but take note of the outstanding qualities of numerous Black men and women in recent and contemporary history. The names of the Black men and women who have made lasting contributions in all fields of endeavor are too numerous and too well-known to be repeated in this presentation.

Whether in Africa or in other lands, Blacks are known for their resilience, adaptability and monumental capacity to survive harsh conditions.

These facts about Blacks are indispensable factors in the effort at *counterconditioning*. Numerous experiments in psychology have demonstrated the assumption that people will reconsider their *illogical prejudices* if given positive facts about racial groups.

Black people everywhere are now at the threshold of a new era of Black awareness and pride. In Africa, certain governments are taking steps to accelerate this. In countries and cities African names are being gradually substituted to reflect the African tradition. For instance, *Ghana* for Gold Coast, *Zaire* for Belgian Congo, *Zambia* for Northern Rhodesia, *Malawi* for Nyasaland, *Namibia* for South-West Africa, *Zimbabwe* for Rhodesia; *Kinshasa* for Leopoldville, *Maputo* for Lourenco Marques. When the former U.S. Secretary of Transportation William T. Coleman Jr., a Black man, substituted the term "white-mail" in place of "blackmail" in a public statement he made on January 5, 1977, it was a simple but significant aspect of Black awareness and the counter-action of de-conditioning which has now become inevitable.

As long ago as 1900, W. E. B. DuBois, the leading Black American intellectual of the first half of this century, declared with great insight: "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color

Philosophers and educators on both sides of the color line must rally together to help solve this problem. They must teach the world a new humanism based on brotherhood, love, compassion, equity and justice, without race discrimination. This new humanism must, therefore, reject the fraudulent dichotomy which had not only divided mankind into two main classes—Black and white—but had assigned inferiority to Blacks, and tended to characterize blackness and its concomitants with a growing list of dismal superlatives.

Must mankind always be in confrontation with one another as if to justify the Hobbian "*homo homini lupus*" (man wolf to man)? In this nuclear age and superpower reactions, our education must be geared to inter-racial and intercultural understanding if we are to build a humane and progressive world order.

Black people must try a bit harder to acquire all the crosscurrents of contemporary know-how, in full awareness of the truth in the James Madison dictum of nearly 200 years ago, that "knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives." Blacks must demonstrate that *Black is also beautiful*, not just by sloganeering but by rising above the present adversity through discipline, concrete actions, concrete achievements and intelligent well-thought-out strategy in the execution of our deeds; for actions without proper thought processes and ratiocination negate the substantive quality of man.

In this way, Black people can significantly contribute to the accelerated elimination of the negativism and distortion hitherto concomitant with the concept of blackness. □

*Festus Okafor, Ph.D., author of Africa at the Crossroads: Philosophical Approach to Education, is chairman of the Department of Human Development, Foundations and Childhood Education, University of the District of Columbia.*