

BLACKNESS IN GERMANY

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1. Introduction: Euro-African relationships – Past and Present

The concept of Blackness in Europe is a topic often ignored by its policy makers and the inhabitants alike. But the fact that the former colonists had made and still make use of Africans in their armies is a phenomenon that has not been acknowledged in most European history books. Francophone African soldiers fought alongside French soldiers during the First and Second World Wars. A recent British Broadcasting Corporation News report also reiterated this fact as it highlighted the role played by African soldiers during the World War II as they fought at the side of British Soldiers in Burma. An exhibition was organised for these unsung heroes at the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, United Kingdom. The exhibition Curator, the Zimbabwean artist, Raphael Chikukwa said it “is the story of the forgotten heroes of the Commonwealth.”¹ The exhibition focused on pictures and stories told by soldiers from the 11th East African Division which also includes Tanzania,

Zambia and Zimbabwe, which have been omitted from the World War II histories. Indeed Britain has not only made use of South African soldiers in its army since the First World War, 700 of them are still serving in the British army and are fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq among other places. In addition to it, a new film called *Les Indigenes* or *The Natives*, which was first shown at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year (2006), follows the fortunes of a group of North Africans who fought for France in World War II. The film closes with an indictment of the low pensions they later received. An estimated 300,000 colonial soldiers from North Africa, West Africa and Indochina fought for France in World War II.

To say that people of African descent have not made their impact in Europe will mean ignoring the major impact also made by some personalities, such as literary authors, for example. Notable among them are the poet Alexander Pushkin in Russia. He was the great grand son of an Ethiopian Prince. The Ethiopian Royal family belongs to the dynasty founded by Menelik, the son of the Old Testament King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in Russia. The author, Alexandre Dumas in France and a host of others have risen up in fame and in importance in their various countries. So why is there still the need for Blacks to define their existence in Europe? Why are there still walls separating them from their adopted countries? Are there political reasons behind these rejections, plain ignorance or both? It is in this vein that this paper seeks to analyse the notion of Blackness within the German internal and foreign policies. At the same time, it seeks to shed some light on the dynamics of growing up coloured in Germany and what it means to be a German parent of a

coloured child. This aspect has been given some attention because they are as much victims of racial prejudice as their children.

Being black in Germany means that one is a foreigner, who has to struggle against stereotypical notions of the African continent as one at the bottom of the evolution ladder. The issue of Blackness is determined by the operational modes of the political climate in Germany, which depends largely on the political party in power. A look at the political situation at work in Germany before World War I shows that racial discrimination already existed in the societies because of the way the German colonies were operated before they were taken over by France and England. We only have to look at the Herero Uprising in Namibia whereby thousands of Hereros were killed. The Swakopmunder street is a proof of the German colonial history. What seems to have gone lost in history is the fact that the first official German concentration camp was built there in 1907 and all the Hereros who dared to be against the German hegemony were killed there. The Africans in Germany, including the Francophones in the French army stationed on the Rhine river, who had relationships with German women and gave birth to mixed children which were seen as exotic and unwanted, were victimised along with the Jews, the Roma and the Sinti and other non-Aryan foreigners by the German NS government.

In an attempt to shed some light on the dynamics of cultural co-existence in multi-ethnic societies as a way of bridging the gap between them, Homi Bhabha has developed the concept of “cultural hybridity” to discuss the dynamics of the impacts of colonisation.² However, hybridity in my opinion is the co-existence of two cultures which do not mix together. Bart Moore-Gilbert even goes on to add that:

Postmodern vision of cultural synthesis or bricolage is too close in its political implications, for Bhabha's liking, to dominant mainstream discourse of multi-culturalism and cultural relativism. Both of these in different ways seek to minimize the challenges posed by cultural difference in order to preserve the organicist mythology of the host community or nation (Moore-Gilbert 125).

Bhabha's observation identifies the differences in cultures existing within the same country. Indeed multiculturalism is highly complex in its composition. However, it is secondary within German contexts because the dominant factor still remains the skin colour, the otherness. There is often the tendency for politicians and even Germans themselves to claim that Germany is a homogeneous country. However, this claim is an illusory one because of the existence of multiple cultures due to the mass migrations both from parts of Europe, and the rest of the world. Inter-marriages have also always taken place. Moreover, since people of African origins have been in Germany as far back as the 10th century or even earlier,³ the possibility of mixed African presence has always been there. But their presence became a national problem as the political climate became hostile to people considered as threats to the German existence and supremacy. Indeed in Christoph Butterwegge's words:

Der frühe Kapitalismus fand im mittelalterlich-christlichen Weltbild einen Traditionsfundus vor, der es ihm erlaubte, die Unterscheidung zwischen 'Rassen' auf die neuen soziökonomischen Verhältnisse zu übertragen und als Herrschaftsmittel zu instrumentalisieren.⁴

Early capitalism found in a tradition in the middle-age Christian picture that allowed them to transfer differences between 'races' to the new socio-economic relationships and to use it as hegemonic instrument. [Translation]

This is quite significant because it shows that the differences between races have often been made use of to marginalize and discriminate against people of colour, whom given their minority status are often unable to defend themselves effectively.

As a result of this, Blackness in Germany means *otherness*. This *otherness* impedes the integration process of this ethnic minority. The polemic was centred round the unwillingness to do away with stereotypes surrounding the African continent which was seen to have Black inhabitants. Never mind the diversity in ethnic origins whereby not all Africans are dark-skinned. To them, the Black person connotes the miscreant, the mugger, the drug-pusher who pollutes the society with his presence.

2. Afro-German youths.

After the unrests witnessed in France and some parts of Europe in recent years, Europe is gradually becoming aware of the need to integrate these children in the countries because of the danger of ending up the same way the French did in France in 2005. This is the outcome of the years of inaction whereby the "nouveau Européens" have been conveniently ignored with the hope that they would go back to the holes they were coming from. Never mind the fact that many of them were born in Europe and are more European than African. The governments failed to acknowledge that these

young generations have dual nationalities. They are Africans by origin and Europeans by nationality. Subsequently, the riots in France forced a number of the other European countries to reevaluate their policies towards those immigrants already integrated in their countries. The Dutch government's setting up a foundation called AfroEuro already expatiates upon this through their aim to:

Create an **identity** and therefore a positive self-image for people of African origin and people of other races, who love and identify with Africa and thereby creating an environment for positive self-esteem and accomplishment. In view of the need to create a common **platform for dialogue** and understanding between peoples of African origin and their new nations here in Europe and the vital need to **integrate** in their new community and thereby better obtain opportunities for their own development and self-improvement, And in view of the need to create such a forum here in The Netherlands and eventually in other parts of Europe, is hereby created the Stichting AfroEuro.⁵

This is indeed an ambitious venture because it has still not been fully translated into many of the European countries. We find that the question of identity is still an important one which has not yielded much fruit because efforts by the governments to set up different apparatus to make life easier for people of African descent and other foreigners without actually sensitising the inhabitants to the need to desist from shutting out the latter have remained unsuccessful. On the contrary, resentments for people of colour have been quite prevalent because the inhabitants have not been aware of the need to do away with old stereotypes and reach out to the foreigners living among them. What impacts do these prejudices have on children and teenagers who were born and raised in Germany? This aspect of the Afro-European studies has

been less explored because of the limited information available on it. However, it is an important aspect because it directs the trend taken by the Afro-Germans as we see them today.

In an interesting book entitled: *Sichtbar Anders...* edited by Eva Massingue, a German mother of an Afro-Deutsche child, some youths were given the opportunity to voice their opinion on what it means to grow up in Germany; although they consider themselves as Germans with dual origins they are still very much discriminated against by their classmates, society and the country itself. Massingue did not only stop at this but also gave a much needed insight into the lives of German parents who also have to live with this discrimination against not only their children but themselves as well. These children are marginalized; they exist on the interface of German and African or African-American societies depending on their African origins, while being entrenched in the German culture in which they grew up.

In the various interviews conducted with the youths, there is the 16 year old Deborah whose mother is Ethiopian and her father is German, for example. She is quite proud of her dual origins and the fact that she had been exposed to her Ethiopian origins by her mother who also took her to her country on a visit for two months. She also learnt to speak Amharic (spoken in Ethiopia), which is also an additional knowledge other than her German language. But she cannot understand why stereotypes about the Blackness are still prevailing in the 21st century. What sets children from families where the parents are married and live together as a family aside is that the contact to the other culture is encouraged and practiced. These children are also exposed to their African origins either in parts of Africa or other parts of the world where people of African descent have

made their homes. Indeed the reason why such prejudices are still very much alive at least in Germany is that racism is passed on from generation to generation and words and connotations which today are seen as politically and racially incorrect in countries like the United States of America are still used to degrade people of colour in Germany, because much conscious effort has actually not been made to publicly declare them as unfit to be used. So, we find words like *Neger* being used indiscriminately. It took me a while to figure out that these words are part of their vocabulary and even if acceptable connotations like *Farbige* or *coloured* were to be made use of, it still would not have made much difference because there is very much the tendency for them to slip back into old habits.

This ignorance is manifested in the interview given by an 18 year old girl. In her class in secondary school, they studied Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. Her classmates sprang up and shouted that they wanted to play the role of the “Neger”. She vehemently protested against the use of this word but she was told that she was taking it too personally, after all they have friends whom they also call “Negern”. This is a classical example of ignorance which has been prevalent among the inhabitants.

The fact that the German government has recently ratified the law against the discrimination of ethnic minorities is merely in theory alone because in practice, the situation still remains unchanged. The interviews with the teenagers in Massingue’s book all have one thing in common which is the issue of race, their *otherness* based on their dual origins. Since the government has failed to take up the fight against racial prejudice, the onus has been passed on to people of African descent living in Germany. Efforts are made by Afro-

Germans like Noah Sow and her organisation – the *Braunermob*-- to curtail such practices, through various workshops on racism and the use of language in the news, because language is a fundamental basis for change in society. This is indeed significant because as she said: “Wenn ich nicht weiß, dass bestimmte Worte beleidigend sind, dann benutze ich diese Worte natürlich weiter”⁶ [If I do not know that certain words are discriminatory, then I will naturally keep on using them]. But they are often undermined by the inhabitants’ unwillingness to do away with old practices simply because they have been in use for generations and they see no reason why they should not be made use of.

On the other hand we also have the German parents who lean far out of their windows by getting into relationships with people of African origins despite existing stereotypes and the likelihood of being isolated in their societies. These German parents also have to fight against the same prejudice. They have to protect their families against social injustice. Some of the parents like the German, Claudia Khalifa have interesting stories to tell. According to her, people find it difficult to imagine that she is the mother of brown children. They ask her where she got them from. Her child gets bugged down by the burden of his dual origins in school and comes back home crying and not wanting to have anything to do with his father’s native Sudanese country. He is rarely invited to birthday parties because parents do not want their children to interact with him. The major problem that arises out of this is that these German parents are often at loss as to how to react to the situation. Should they go for the frontal attack by calling parent-teacher meetings whereby the issue of race is discussed or should they simply remove their children from the schools with the hope that

things will be better elsewhere? Either way, they end up being frustrated because there is no one way to deal with such situations.

Moreover, their actions will not make the problem go away because the children will continue to be victimised by their ignorant classmates, teachers who do not understand their plights and the society which turns a blind eye to their problems. Indeed, it is no easy task. How do you tell your child who comes crying home after school, after having been victimised in school because of his skin-colour that he is no different from the other kids or that the same blood runs in his veins? The child will most certainly not understand because he sees no difference between himself and the other kids in his class or his school.

Besides, the fact that positive pictures of Africans are hardly aired on the television hardly help matters. A television series called *Wie den Wilden* is aired on Sat 1 whereby a German family tries to survive among villagers or nomads in a village in one of the African countries. These and wars as well as natural disasters make up the news on the African continent. They have also had their effect on the German population because they have not provided room for new modes of approaching Blacks in general.

To conclude, the issue of Blackness in Germany is a debate which has remained without a positive result. Interests for this topic have been driven by the political tide, depending on the current political situation. They are often seen as the root cause of all the evils going on in their country. Given that like many ethnic minorities in central Europe, they are underrepresented and their voices are not always heard. While there are groups like the ISD, Adefra, the Initiative Bruanermob, African communities and so on, they are still in the minority.

These rejections are contradicted by the obvious European or more specifically Northern obsession with African artefacts which have decorated museums across the North for decades and even centuries. Many of them have been illegally acquired and many more priceless riches have been looted from parts of Africa in colonial times. They have been prominently displayed as artefacts from primitive cultures. Even the French recently opened a museum of tribal arts, which only serves to show the approach to non European works of art that underscores this point. The Nigerian government responded more positively than most African countries by insisting that three of its more than 1500 year old Nok sculptures bought by the Louvre authorities from a Belgian collector either be returned to them or be leased for 25 years. This agreement was made at the Nigerian government's insistence that the French government concede that the works of art were stolen from the Nigerian people. At the same time the Nigerian government called on the British Museum of Arts in 2002 to return their stolen works of art back to them but the struggle is still going on. The question is, do these Africans and other old civilisations across the Third World which have all produced ageless works of art deserve to still be called inferior? Such qualifications are merely used to justify the continued, systematic exploitation of people of African descent. Blackness is not a curse but it has been misused by those seeking to cover up the atrocities committed against people of African descent for centuries. In the past, the excuse that Africa was an enigma to the North was often used to justify the latter's actions; but today, in these days of enlightenment, these arguments are no longer viable.

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¹http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/picture_gallery/06/africa_africa0s_world_war_ii_veterans/html/1.stm-
accessed 10.09.06.

² See Bhabha 1994, 85-92.

³ See Martin and Alonzo 2004.

⁴ Source unknown.

⁵ www.afroeuro.org/whyafroeuro.asp - 9k - accessed on 20.08.2006.

⁶ Sow, Noah. UNESCO Erklärung gegen den Begriff "Rasse." *Dokumentation*, 2005.