

The Psycho-Historical Relationships Between People of Mixed Heritage and Diaspora Africans

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to look at the complex relationships that have developed in slavery and post slavery societies between those descended of Africans brought across the Atlantic as slaves, those people of European heritage and people of mixed backgrounds, here sometimes referred to as Creoles. These historical relationships play their part in how we relate to each other today. There has been little debate on this issue since the emergent Black Power debates among Black radicals in late sixties Britain when people of mixed heritage, (one black one white parent) were not considered as part of the struggle. 'Light skin' Creoles from the Caribbean and Africa were barely able then to cross the line into Blackness and all the optimism that this seemed to offer e.g. 'Black is Beautiful'. There have always been people of mixed racial heritage but the current debates seemed cantered around the offspring of Black and White people who became conspicuous in post-second World War England. The existence of racial discrimination during this period led to difficulties for some mixed couples and their children. Discord between the two parts of their ethnic inheritance sometimes led to the loss of one or both, and family members along with this. In the light of this what has been the experience of loss and separation and when will our society get beyond seeing people at face value.

There are many issues tied up with the topic of bi racial people in the British context that complicates matters in a way that seems much more simply understood in the context of Africa and the Caribbean, the USA also seem to have complications. Historically children of mixed heritage have been born to black mothers, usually enslaved or in domestic service to white masters. Apart from the mixing of African women and establishment white men there are many other ethnic and cultural mixes throughout the world and represented in the Caribbean a melting pot of many peoples. The national emblem of Jamaica carries the words 'Out of many one people'. In Jamaica the children of Africans and Chinese are called Chiny-royal and in the Eastern Caribbean states of Trinidad, Grenada and Guyana there are large communities of Dougla people born of Africans who arrived there over four hundred years ago, and Indians, who arrived in the Caribbean in the mid 1800's. There are 'Piol' (Espaniol Spanish) people, descendants of Caribs and Africans and on the South American mainland, Creolios the people born of Spanish conquistadors and indigenous Mayan or Aztec peoples. Apart from that region, throughout the world there are mixed people, putting a lie to the notion of purity and race. Throughout Northern and Eastern Africa, Africans and Arabs have mixed. Southern Africans mixing with Europeans have created a distinct group called Coloureds. In pre-partition India it was the Anglo-Indians who ran the administration and businesses and who fled India when the British were no longer in charge in 1947. In the Caribbean region, a meeting place of many different peoples there is a long history of mixed or creolised people who are seen as having their place along the spectrum of hues and cultures.

Since the 1940's and to some extent before that, the social panic in the United Kingdom has been of white mothers giving birth to mixed heritage babies. Here in the UK it was a matter of shame that white woman were in mixed unions. In the Caribbean it was a fact of life that black women were, 'creaming their coffee' by having the children of European men and to some extent it was a badge of pride. The symbol of a light skin child in the Caribbean was one of hope and social betterment given that light skinned people were privileged in education and work. This is exemplified in 'Beccas bakra baby' a Caribbean short story probably from 'Banana Bottom' or 'Tobacco road'... a story about a young black girl who has given birth to her master's offspring. Even dark skinned people have historically hoped that

their children would be born 'with colour' meaning with a lighter colour in order to have a better life. This quote, an old Jamaican saying, from Katrin Norris' 1962 publication illustrates this well.

"For example, Jamaican for 'All parents think their geese are swans' is 'Every John Crow [black man] think him pickney [child] white, and every jackass think him cubby [colt] racehorse pickney"p.15.

In a harsh and competitive environment of slavery and colonial life giving birth to a child who in some way resembled the masters was a smart move in order to ensure your own and the child's survival. By not only being the masters property but also his blood often but not always secured better treatment. In Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins White Mask* written in the 1960's he talks of a beautiful Martiniquean woman in Paris, Mayotte who declaims that she could only marry a white man in order to have beautiful children. Mayotte like a perfect product of French colonisation in the Caribbean has learnt over several centuries to pay homage to the beauty of Europeans not considering that she could also have beautiful children with a person of her own African antecedents. Unless she sees herself as possessing particularly European features, and therefore different to her country folk, she might also see herself as not beautiful. The white fear and disapproval of Black males coupling with White females in past decades sprang from a similar idea on the plantation that white women, like Cesar's wife had to be above suspicion, and that black woman were the property of the master. In short women were property under the control of white wealthy men. Black union with a white woman even in modern times was an appropriation of property and power and was seen as supplanting the white master. As late as the 1960's in the southern states of the United States of America black men were being lynched for their daring to look at white women in a considered inappropriate.

In the US and the Caribbean there is a legacy of shadeism where people know well that light skins are passports to more privileged or favoured lives. The Creoles or 'Mulattoes,' as they were called were the centre of what divided the Blacks from the White owners. Creoles grew in number, as did their power to inherit or purchase the fine estates vacated by the white wealthy. It did not take too long before the Creoles were replacing the white masters as the elites and in turn learned to abuse the dark skinned people in ways that were not dissimilar to those before them. For that and for the many privileges their lighter skins afforded them they were both desired and envied and hated. In the Caribbean the interrelationship between the darker skinned African and the Creoles is bittersweet. There is a complex web of relationships involving kinship dependency and gratitude which regulates these relationships it is always there below the surface organising wealth health and education but not often openly referred to. The sometimes ambivalent nature of feelings become very apparent however during an angry exchange in a taxi queue or supermarket checkout if a Creole person tries to jump a queue or puts on airs. They would be asked if they were 'playing white,' often a swift reminder to the Creole that they were not the oppressive white ruling class but the bastard offspring, not better than any one else. The subtlety of social stratification in Jamaica is well analysed by F.M. Henriques in his 1953 publication 'Family and Colour in Jamaica'

Most Creoles were called 'local whites' in the Caribbean and on their immigrating to The United Kingdom and North America had lost status as whites and became Black...not usually by their own choosing. It would be fair to say that most people of African descent who came to the UK, whatever shade would now call themselves Black people. Before that many Caribbean people did not think of themselves as a colour in much the same way that most white people in this country do not think of themselves as white, but as people. Black consciousness in the 1960's helped those of African descent to define themselves in the British context. This being a time of great world and social change, it was shocking to find that skin shade prejudice was and is still live and kicking in Castro's communist Cuba. Whilst this period helped people from the Caribbean and Africa to define themselves in the United Kingdom as Black and no longer as Coloured, those people of mixed heritage could chose to be Black in the new political solidarity or remain 'Half caste' an old fashioned self-defining term, therefore

remaining outside of the new identity which defined Africans and Caribbean's in the United Kingdom. The American civil rights movement, the plight of black people in Southern Africa and the 'winds of change' which brought about the pride of Ghana's Independence, led to the politicisation of Black people in the United Kingdom. Discussing this period of history in his book "History of the people of Trinidad and Tobago" Eric Williams a former Prime Minister of that nation quotes "The electorate of the country was able to see and understand it's problems in the context of the ancient Athenian democracy or the federal systems of the United States and Switzerland, in the context of the great anti-colonial movements of Nehru and Nkrumah, and in the context of the long and depressing history of colonisation in Trinidad and Tobago and the West Indies.p.244" The time had come for the colonised to throw off the lead, which tethered them to Great Britain as lesser beings. Their independence would have far reaching consequences for the white ruling class, their creolised offspring and others who served happily as intermediaries. In the light of Black consciousness, persons of dual heritage, with two cultural inheritances were in a difficult situation, their inclusion being conditional on giving up or loosing something of their rich inheritance. At that time British born people of mixed parentage, being faced with a stark choice of making an identification with a self-conscious 'proud' black group or the white majority to which they had become accustomed was a difficult choice and many people did not choose.

Given that Black women have given birth to mixed babies for hundreds of years outside of Europe and these children have had an acculturation as mixed people in black communities. The reverse in the past has been problematic in the United Kingdom. Why is it that these children born of mixed unions who are adored in the Caribbean as having captured the best of both their inheritances are somehow reminders of their mother's shame and are disproportionately represented in foster care or local authority care? This has been well dramatised in the Mike Lee film 'Secrets and lies'. The mother who had given up her daughter for adoption many years earlier is shocked when the mixed parentage daughter returns to find her. The mother who is sure that some mistake has been made tells the young woman that she could not possibly be her daughter because she had never been with a Black man. There is wonderful moment in the film when the realisation comes to the mother and she retrieves the lost memory of the father, the Black man who she was not supposed to have been with, memorably played by the actress Brenda Blethyn. Whilst it is my understanding that this mother did not see her baby at birth and the infant's mixed status played no part in her being given up for adoption, this was the case for some White mothers who could not cope with the daily abuse and being socially ostracized. Many children of mixed parentage born to white mothers were taken into the care system during the past decades but social mores, which are now less censorious, makes it possible for these mothers to raise their own children. In the 1950's stage play and film 'A Taste of Honey' by Shelia Delaney the Black seaman had moved on by the time his white sweetheart discovers that she is pregnant. She is left to go it alone with her baby. The relationships between Black women and White men in the British context appear to attract little attention in the media or the arts. Apart from the odd mention in 1970's pop songs about the sexual voracity of black women, the Rolling Stone's 'Brown Sugar' and Elton John's 'Island Girl', little is mentioned about black women in relation to White men. By contrast such boastful and triumphant popular songs about white women sung by black men would never be aired on the radio. The social codes in place for hundreds of years would not allow it. Such liaisons have always had to be kept in the dark if ever they took place. My interest in the Caribbean novel developed over the years as a result of reading Jean Rhys's 'Wide Sargasso Sea'. Introduced to this writer as a teenager I was drawn to the unfortunate Creole woman Bertha Rochester also known as Antoinette Cosway in 'Jane Eyre' the novel by Charlotte Bronte. When Jean Rhys, also a Creole was asked why she chose to write Wide Sargasso Sea she replied that she wanted to write a life for the poor unfortunate creature portrayed in Bronte's novel. Three films by Whoopie Goldberg, the Sister Acts, one with Ted Danson the name of which I don't recall and in my view the best with Ray Liotta Corrina Corrina looks seriously at a relationship between a White man and a Black woman. The negative image or racial sexual stereotype of the black

man has been such that he is imagined to have a contaminating effect on white women particularly if there are children born of their coupling. Society's views have always been manipulated by politics or media but never so much as in the early 20th century with films like W.D. Griffiths Birth of a Nation where the black man is portrayed as a rapist and the KKK is the only solution to that problem. Later on there was the compensatory film 'Guess who's Coming to Dinner' striking themes similar to 'Corrina Corrina' in that the black character has first to show their credentials to the viewer in order to qualify for the role as interested in a white person. The character played by Sydney Poitier is a highly educated gentleman practically devoid of carnal desire....every mother's dream, and Corrina an educated black woman too qualified for jobs as a maid. Other films have examined the issue of mixed relationships, Spike Lee's Jungle Fever and The Bodyguard. Early Hollywood cinema also depicted the lives of people born of mixed unions often in those days serving as cautionary tales. The 'films Imitation of life' and 'Bahwani Junction' both tell stories of pain and struggle for the person of mixed racial heritage. Shakespeare's Othello however is subject to such racial projections spoken from the mouth of Iago. 'The ram tugging your ewe' speech to Desdemona's father has sentiments that reek of sexual jealousy, which is of course central to the plot of the play.

We are now in the third or fourth generation of mixed unions and children of mixed heritage. Apart from the great port cities of Cardiff and Liverpool and to some extent Bristol where there are populations of ten or so generations of mixed parentage people, statistics show that 40% of black men and 30% of black women married of the out of their community. As this trend continues people of mixed parentage will be unremarkable and their social visibility as part of the shade and colour swatch of a nation with a rich colonial past. As a result of the institutionalisation of mixed parentage children over the years many have experienced multiple losses of people in their lives extended families grandparents the richness of their dual culture enabling them to make some identification with what has gone before them and not only favour the dominant white culture.

Tom, a man of mixed parentage in his late 40's who had experienced depression after a marriage break up began long-term therapy with me. He experienced prejudice and racial violence growing up in Wales but said that knowing that he was descended from the proud Yoruba Tribe helped him. He said that his father informed them of their culture and made them to believe that they were special and important. His White Welsh mother thought that dad was filling their heads with nonsense but it was very important to him to find himself a place in his mind where he was more than the racist names that he was called. Having recently learnt to use computers and the Internet he discovered Family in Nigeria probably because of his father's unusual European name. He discovered that his father's family were indeed important, that his paternal grandfather had fought with Commonwealth West African forces in the First World War and as a Black African was unusually appointed to the post of Deputy District Commissioner in British ruled Nigeria on his return as a hero. His father who had come to the United Kingdom to study engineering in the mid 1940's had caught the eye of a pretty young woman and they were married. After his father's death Tom travelled to meet relatives in Nigeria for the first time and did so on many occasions. His father had never returned to Nigeria and had not given a reason for not doing so. Tom said that after meeting his father's family he realised why; because the comfortable lifestyles of Nigerian family and their expectations of him could never have matched the humble lives their father had lived with them in Wales.

Much has been made about the identity problems that people of mixed parentage raised in this country are burdened with. In Tom's case this was only so until he was able to carve out a unique identity for himself in his white inner city neighbourhood. To some extent his identity before that had been 'ready made' for him. As a 'Half caste' a term he used to describe himself. Tom and his family were at the bottom rung of social pecking order. His mother was seen as an undesirable for marrying a black man and racial prejudice as well as racial sexual taboos sealed the fate of the family. This was independent of the fact that his father was in skilled technical work and always employed as compared with many of the local men who were unskilled and survived on an admixture of the dole and petty crime. As a child his father had been a source of shame to him because he made them different. He wished that he would disappear and blamed his father for his difficult life. He said that after he had got to know his father, he stopped being a blackie or a half-caste and became a Yoruba. It was not unusual for children of mixed parentage in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 60s to harbour, not always at a conscious level, certain contempt for the Black parent. It was difficult to keep the racism and prejudice outside the front door from getting inside the home and negatively flavouring relationships. I recall the character of a young man of mixed parentage in the film 'To Sir with Love' based on the novel by E.R. Braithwaite saying how much he hated his black father for marrying his white mother. Here the young man views his father's and by implication his own colour as a pollutant or contagion. Having gone through something of this self hatred and hatred of other blacks Tom found a route to redemption via his African ancestry. He boasted that his Nigerian granddad had fought in the First World War and had medals to prove it...they, his friends on the street didn't, they had not had honour conferred on them in this way.

From my experience children of any sort will have a sense of identity and pride that is passed on to them by parents and those around them, and more helpfully supported by society at large. Being of mixed parentage is neither about being culturally deficient nor of being in a confusion of both cultures. Sadly couples in mixed relationships are at a disadvantage and sometimes have to rely on each other, support not being forthcoming from family or network. Being in mixed relationships or being of mixed parentage is hampered by society's views of white racial purity and exclusivity. The ascendancy of black pride in recent years has led to these views of purity being promulgated by Blacks. In some quarters Pan Africanists and black separatists would construct notions of black purity. Constructed around essentialist ideas around Blackness and Whiteness these beliefs served the function of keeping people in their place in earlier times. In the USA during the 1970's a woman took her case to the Supreme Court in order to clarify her racial grouping. She did not meet the test of whiteness because she was just more than one 32nd part Black, not half or quarter, and therefore could not be white. The test of whiteness is strictly applied but for blackness it is often about having a black ancestor. Whilst those descended from generations of mixed people and possess European type characteristics not African, identify as Black in the USA. Whiteness, being an exclusive club access has been denied. This could only have been predicated on the notion of White superiority and Black inferiority and the social systems that exist to keep this in place.

To varying degrees we are all creolised by culture or by birth. Ideas of European superiority in the Caribbean region have led to the degradation of the African until the rise of Pan Africanism among intellectuals in the 1920's. Many moved away from the belief of 'lighter skin greater worth' in Africa and the Caribbean only to see that the same purpose of colonisation was still being served by shadeism in the UK. The black person and the British born person of mixed heritage at times feel pitted against each other, both ultimately feeling a sense of betrayal in the land of the master where opportunities are scarce. The feelings of exclusion experienced by some people of mixed heritage in relation to black communities can be contrasted by the resentment felt by some black people that all the gains that they made in emancipation, state independence and in the UK, civil and equal opportunities rights, they did without the support of mixed parentage people who did not join with them in solidarity, yet now gladly reap the benefits. It is not surprising that the relationships between them have for centuries been

complex and fraught. For many years this issue has been difficult to talk about. Now, with a greater understanding of the dynamics which have made it difficult to trust and difficult to talk, an open and perhaps difficult dialogue can begin.

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