

BLACKS IN BRITAIN

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INTRODUCTION

The dispersal of Black people from their original home in Africa to other parts of the world is a significant aspect of human and global historical experience. At various times and under a myriad of circumstances, Blacks have had to adjust to developments of international ramifications in their new homes. While the circumstances that led to their emigration out of the continent are multifaceted, so is the experience in their new abode. This chapter looks at the experience of Blacks in Britain from the antiquity to the first half of the twentieth century. Emphasis is placed on important aspects of domestic and international developments, which defined and redefined their status and identity in Britain.

BLACKS IN BRITAIN: FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO THE 19TH CENTURY

Archeological and literary evidence have revealed the presence of Black people in Romano-British period. The historical account of the life and times

of Emperor Septimius Severus who lived between AD 146 and 211 has a description of his encounter with Black soldiers. There is also evidence of Black presence on Hadrian's around AD 200. The original birthplace of these earliest Africans is presumably in North Africa and Sudan where they were captured to serve in the Roman army. There is also literary evidence of a Viking's raid of North Africa and how they transported their African captives to Ireland around AD 862. There is no concrete evidence that the Vikings "systematically traded in slaves from Africa."¹ African captives were frequently presented to the elite class as gifts.

European courts had Blacks as ambassadors and intellectuals during the 13th century. However, it was not until the 15th century that they started appearing in significant numbers in English and Scottish courts. During this century, Blacks were also employed as entertainers. North African raid on Scotland and the involvement of the Portuguese

¹ Paul Edwards, "The Early African Presence in the British Isles," in Jagdish S. Gundara and Ian Duffied (eds.) *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain: From the Earliest Times to Mid-Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 13.

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in slave trading are believed to have contributed to the increase in the Black presence in Scotland during the 15th century. The figure of Blacks in Britain up to the outbreak of the English War is uncertain. In addition, as Folarin Shyllon has suggested, we can peg it to hundreds but not thousands of people during this period. During Elizabethan times, a good number resided in London. What is certain is that by 1596 and 1601, the Black population was sizeable enough to create acrimony in official quarters.²

Blacks did not share in the rights enjoyed by Britons. This was well-sanctioned by Elizabeth I's statements describing Africans as "beastly people, living without a God, law, religion or common wealth."³ It was common for Africans who wanted to become Christian to be tortured by their masters. The expulsion order of Blacks by Elizabeth I was informed by the proposition that their presence threatened the purity of the English blood and the livelihood of White servants. Folarin Shyllon has argued that the history of Black expulsion or repatriation since the Elizabethan period has always been chiefly influenced by the changing nature of race relations, which irrespective of time and circumstances has been dictated by the perception of Blacks as un-pure elements.⁴

In Renaissance Britain, Black identity was constructed around the notion of "abnormal" physical appearance-morphologically and colorwise. The notion of Africa as a mysterious continent was also well circulated. However, the philosophy that best explains the disposition of the English to Black identity was the sharp and irreconcilable differences they established between human "inner" character and "outside" appearance. The principle of natural order envisaged that the inner human characteristics are mirrored outside; impliedly, "what was seen on the surface of the body was a reflection of both

the inner being and of its cultural niche."⁵ Whiteness denoted "origin" while blackness meant variation and deviation. The English also felt that the face of the African was "native to an ape" and could never become a White man's face. The appearance of a Black body was contrary to Basic English and European ideas of beauty, which was measured in terms of the orderliness of the body and the relationship between one part and the other. In spite of the fact that a good amount of this literature and paintings of Renaissance England were predominantly influenced by racial prejudices, the other side of the coin is that the British were able to learn more about Africans, by reading stories related to their survival and presence in Europe.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade that began in the early 16th century changed the figure and historical experience of Blacks in Britain, forever. It is a truism that Britain was a latecomer in the hideous trade in humans, coming after their Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch counterparts; however, it was able to compete with its predecessors. It was in 1663 that a British company, the Royal Adventurers into Africa obtained a charter to buy and sell African slaves. This British merchant company had earlier traveled frequently to Africa to buy and sell commodities other than slaves and had been involved in capturing children and teens that were sold to British homes as servants or used as "pets" on ships.⁶ From the 17th to the late 19th century, the appearance of a small slave boy, (mostly below the age of ten) standing on a slave ship had an ornamental purpose. Liverpool entered the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1700 when a vessel under the captainship of William Webster delivered some 220 slaves to the Barbados. By the tail end of the 17th century, British merchants, sailors and captains,

² Folarin Shyllon, "The Black presence and experience in Britain: An analytical overview," in Gundara and Duffied (eds.) 202.

³ Ibid., 205.

⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁵ Anu Korhonen, "Washing the Ethiopian white: conceptualizing Black Skin in Renaissance England," in T.F Earle and K.J.P. Lowe, *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 96.

⁶ Peter Fryer, *Staying in Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), 20.

frequently visited Africa for the purpose of buying and capturing slaves.

While a good number of Black slaves were taken directly to the New World, some were transported to Britain where they worked as porters in seaports and as servants in aristocratic homes. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, African slaves worked on the numerous slave ships that traversed the nooks and crannies of the Atlantic Ocean. It was customary for ship captains, sailors and surgeons to have Black slaves who worked as their domestic servants. Olaudah Equiano's life and times as a slave boy and later a voyager and abolitionist, shed a considerable amount of light on the experience of Blacks as slaves and free person.⁷ The majority of Black slaves in Britain were not in chains. This suggests that they enjoyed a relative degree of freedom (to move from one place to another), compared to their New World counterparts the majority of whom were needed for plantation agricultural labor and had to be chained to ensure compliance.⁸ However, Black slaves in Britain were compelled to wear metal collars riveted round their necks. These metal collars, mostly made of silver or copper, had the inscription of the slave master's name and coat of arms. The British felt a means of identification was needed in a stratified society where absconding of slaves was rampant. A common sight in London, Bristol and Liverpool, included public auctions of slaves and postal advertisement announcing the search for a fugitive slaves. Apprehended slaves were usually sent to the plantations in the West Indies.

The material and political status of a slave master determined the ways slaves were treated. Since slaves formed part of the household, "dressing"

them up and allowing them to wear expensive necklaces, laced bodices and laced cuffs were all part of the conspicuous demonstration of affluence by masters. The wealth of a master was capable of being measured by the ways the slave dressed in public and some well-attended gatherings such as the Lord Mayor Pageant, which brought together London's Merchant capitalist for demonstrating the affluence of the metropolis brought to the core. The conspicuous demonstration of opulence also found expression in the paintings of the period. Zoffany's painting of the Family of Sir William Young contains one of his domestic servants. In addition, in his paintings of Charles, the third Duke of Richmond and Lennox, Zoffany features the Duke being attended by a Black page. However, the representation of Blacks in British arts and entertainment did not constitute a source of freedom from racial prejudice, but an extension or avenues of exploitation and promotion of the well-established order of Black racial inferiority. David Kallingray aptly captures this contradiction:

From the early sixteenth century onwards, Africans were employed or used in Europe for "entertainment"; as "pageant performers" on the stage, in ethnographic shows, the circus and the music hall. Africans were presented as exotic, as grotesque caricatures, freaks, and also as bestial stereotypes. Much of the impresario-organized employment of Africans for purpose of spectacle was in the context of African powerlessness and victimization.⁹

It is misleading to think that all Blacks in Britain and Ireland were slaves and servants during the period of the trans-Atlantic slave. Moreover, a good number lived independent lives, free from bondage and servitude. Blacks were musicians as seen

⁷ See Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Written by himself, 2 vols first edition (London: printed and sold for the author, 1789).

⁸ By the 18th and 19th centuries New World's urban slaves were needed for a wider variety of tasks, which invariably led to a variation in the ways they were contained. Urban slaves tended to enjoy higher degree of physical mobility than their rural and plantation counterparts.

⁹ David Kallingray, "African in the United Kingdom: An Introduction," in David Kallingray eds., *Africans in Britain* (Essex: Frank Cass, 1994), 14.

before the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. A notable example during this period included, George Bridgetower. Others were traders, artisans, and itinerant seamen. In 1731, the City Corporation prohibited Black trade apprenticeship because their numerical strength served as threat to the White's monopoly.¹⁰ The gradual entrenchment of the industrial revolution placed some Black artisan's survival on the line, as it was becoming difficult, due to economic constraints to transit from human to machine power. Blacks also served in the British army. A good example is William Blue who served at Quebec, fought during the American War of Independence and was a sergeant of the Pioneers in a Continental European campaign.

THE ABOLITION OF SLAVE TRADE AND ITS AFTERMATH UP TO 1900

There are two contrasting poles of ideas about the reasons Britain led the war against human cargo. These two ideas include, the Marxist and humanitarian. Let us quickly elaborate upon them. Some intellectuals believe that the change of mode of production from human to machine influenced the decision of the British Parliament which abolished the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and moved on to legalize slavery in all the entire British empire. Marxist scholars, whose influence on this genre of argument remains significant, draw a connection between the Industrial Revolution (change of mode of production from human to machine) and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Having pioneered the Industrial Revolution, Britain is said to have discovered that it needed more machines than human beings. It is also significant to note that the loss of the American colonies after the American War of Independence in 1776 placed the British slave trading enterprises at a level of minimal economic significance.¹¹ In another vein, all that Britain wanted

¹⁰ Shyllon, 206.

¹¹ See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

were commodities such as palm oil and timber, which Africans could be made to produce at home, that is in Africa, and not the sugar or tobacco of the Americas. These raw materials could be used to run British industries and finished products would find their ways back to Africa and other parts of the world. Briefly, having helped in the building of industries, the trans-Atlantic slave trade became anachronistic and had to be abolished since the new pattern of production process had outgrown the conditions, which allowed it to come into existence in the first place.

On the second argument, two significant developments, between the 1760s and 1790s radically changed the status of Black slaves in Britain. Humanitarians campaigned vigorously for the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery. A decisive development that was going to affect inter-racial relations was the Mansfield decision in the Somerset case in 1772. This landmark judgment, which declared it illegal for masters to compel their slaves to leave Britain, served as a springboard to the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in the entire British Empire in 1833. The activities of the abolitionists took a decisive dimension when they initiated the idea of relieving the African poor, living in Britain and United States of America, of their suffering by relocating those that wished to return to their homeland in Africa. In 1789, about 400 Africans were settled on a piece of land acquired from the Koya Temna natives of Sierra Leone. The Americans followed suit. In 1822, the American Colonization Society founded Liberia where they relocated free slaves of African origin. These two colonies later became the bastions of Western education and culture in West Africa through the Christian evangelists who established schools.

Black and White abolitionists adopted several strategies aimed at winning the support of people and the governments. A typical abolitionist rally displayed a free Black mounting the podium, narrating his or her experience to the audience, and showing them the scars received through maltreatment by

erstwhile masters. Generally, speakers at anti-slave trade and slavery rallies were picked in accordance with location. Therefore, poor freed slaves who were still trying to get out of the trauma of slavery mainly addressed rural audiences, while well-educated Black and Whites abolitionists spoke at larger rallies that were held in important locations in Britain. Since this second location usually commanded important audiences who are capable of influencing official policies, abolitionist groups were most likely to feature speakers whose knowledge of the history of slave trade and slavery were backed with empirical reference to the moral, religious and economic malice that human cargo and servitude represented. Another importance of location and abolitionist rallies was the buying of freedom for slaves. Rallies provided the opportunity to raise resources for buying slaves' freedom. Abolitionists tended to raise more monies at rallies attended by influential White Britons in predominantly White neighborhoods or at predominantly White gatherings. The famous Fredrick Douglas gained his freedom through this means in 1846.¹²

The racial dimension to the humanitarian thesis needs to be scrutinized. Here, scholars have argued that the idea of relocating the poor Blacks was not at all altruistic, but rather a product of the age long desire to "relieve Britain of the nuisance" caused by the presence of Blacks in the country. This position suggests that while the humanitarians publicly declared that they were helping the Black poor; their real and ulterior motive was to turn Britain into a predominantly White nation by purging it of the Black elements. This scheme dates back to the Elizabethan period when Blacks were perceived as a threat to the White's purity.¹³ Britain paid the Blacks who fought at the American insurgency, not by giving them their allowances, but by allowing them to become destitute and later repatriating them to Africa.

¹² Fiona Spiers, "Black Americans in Britain and the Struggle for Black Freedom in the United States, 1820-1870," in Gundara and Duffied (eds.), 85.

¹³ Shyllon, 209.

By extension, the racial composition of the numerous anti-slave trade associations requires consideration. In most cases, rich abolitionists tended to be predominantly White, while a good number of their Black counterparts were not as rich as the Whites. This however, should not be viewed as an accident since the pioneers of abolitionist movement were predominantly White. A typical anti-slave trade rally in London would have White speakers and predominantly White audiences, and vice versa. Another dimension to this is that visiting Black abolitionists from the United States of America and the West Indies tended to be accorded greater respect than Black British abolitionists.¹⁴ For instance, visiting American Nathaniel Paul was allowed to address the Common Select Committee while Black Britons were not. In short, Black abolitionists were treated as appendages of White abolitionists in the struggle for abolition of slave trade and racial equality.

A new wave of Black migration to Britain began to emerge as the war against the abolition of slave trade intensified during the second half of the 19th century. Blacks from the Western hemisphere who were either free slaves or runaway migrated massively to Britain for a number of purposes: (1) as seamen or migrant workers (2) schooling (3) as entertainers and actors.¹⁵ Still, others were brought to Britain by their White masters. Black Americans constituted the largest group of migrants during this period. They were encouraged to move because of the widely circulated and exaggerated belief that Britain was a haven free of racial prejudice and discrimination. On getting to Britain, the most unbelievable experience recorded by American blacks was the ability to eat in restaurants, use public conveniences, and travel with limited degree of restriction. Apparently, the reverse was the case in the place in which they came.

The population of Blacks in Britain during this period also contained students. The earliest of such students was William Ansah, a Fante prince of

¹⁴ Spiers, 85.

¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

Annamboe (located in modern Ghana), kidnapped in Africa and taken to Barbados where he was enslaved. After receiving his freedom, Ansaah went to Britain where he enrolled in a school in 1736. West African chiefs also sent their children to Britain for the purpose of learning "White man's book." Philip Quaque, the first African to be ordained a priest in the Church of England, started his education in Britain in 1754 at the age of thirteen.¹⁶ He belonged to a Fante royal family. Others were Afro-Caribbean and African Americans. These students were later going to contribute to the development of Pan Africanism, branded with the central ideas of racial solidarity and selfawareness; Africa for the Africans; opposition to racial discrimination; and emancipation from White supremacy and domination. The pioneers of Pan-Africanism, mostly identified as "proto Pan Africanists" were both ex-slaves and freepersons who received their freedom, acquired some education and put into writing, their ideas of freedom and the future of the Black race. Prominent Black intellectuals of the period were Robison Delany, Edward Wilmot Blyden and James Africanus B. Horton.

Let us take a snap shot at the careers of one of them. Edward Blyden was born in 1832 of a free parent on the Danish held island of St Thomas. Among others, he served as both the Liberian Commissioner to Britain from 1861 to 1862 and as Liberian Ambassador to Britain, 1877-188 and 1892. He wrote some 13 books and expressed his interesting ideas about race and freedom for Blacks. He was convinced that Africans have a past that is worthy. As the Liberian ambassador, he believed in the emergence of a strong African state and saw Liberia as a model for this project. He supported European colonization of Africa on the grounds that it would "civilize" the benighted Africans. His critics felt his friendship with missionaries and well-known racists of the period, coupled with his obsession for people of mixed race was not right.

¹⁶ Hakeem Adi, *West Africans in Britain, 190-1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), 7.

His refusal to attend the first Pan-African conference held in London in 1900 was traced to this ideological disparity. Although Black intellectuals of the period expressed different variants of ideas of freedom and racial equality, ideological disparity did not outweigh the central goal, that is, freedom from servitude and racial prejudice.

BLACKS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITAIN

This section will focus more on the activities of more recent African migrants in Britain. The most important factor that swelled up the population of Africans in Britain during the first half of the 20th century was the establishment of colonial rule over Africa. During this period, the African privileged class continued to see the need to educate their children abroad. In addition, people from humbler background found their ways into the various British colleges and universities. The establishment of oversea scholarship awards by religious, ethnic and regional bodies increased the representation of people of humbler background in British colleges and universities.

While pre-20th century African students contended with the problems of racial prejudice and discrimination, the 20th century ones were going to be challenged not only by racial prejudice but the colonial domination of Africa. It was indeed important for these educated elites to condemn the basis of colonial domination having been exposed to a series of ideas about the ills of capitalism. Some of these Africans had been exposed to the problems of racial prejudice in Africa where the White missionaries discriminated against their Black counterparts on issues of leadership of the church and adherence to certain components of African culture, which include but not limited to polygyny.¹⁷ This tension between Black and White missionaries laid the

¹⁷ See J.F. Ade. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of New Elite* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965).

foundation of nationalism that was spearheaded by Africans in Britain, United States and Africa.¹⁸ The struggle to retaining cultural identity was challenging. From all indications, African students were not against western civilization; indeed, it was the admiration of western education and culture, and the desire to use the knowledge to help their people that took them to Britain in the first place. What some of them were not comfortable with are certain aspects of English culture, which conflicts with African cultural practices and the racially structured manner in which African cultural practices were viewed and treated. It is obvious that Black students, a majority of who came from West Africa during the 20th century were going to have an axe to grind with the British imperial government as a whole and the Colonial Office in particular.

British Marxism, an intellectual and moral offshoot of British Communism had by the 1930s gained influence among university students. What is more, it was not an accident of history that most of the leaders and members of African student associations in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century were going to be leaders of the various African states that began to shake off the hook of colonial domination from the late 1950s. It soon became clear that the formation of associations was the best means of protesting against racial discrimination and other forms of injustice. One such early association according to Hakim Adi was the African Association formed by Henry Sylvester William, a Trinidadian. This association was formed for the purpose of encouraging pan-African unity throughout the British colonies. In the first decade of the 20th century, African students such as Richard Akiwande Savage, H. R. Bankole Bright, and Bandele Omoniyi were household names among university administrators and at the Colonial Office because of their protest against racially discriminatory practices, which include but were not limited to the refusal to appoint 'non-European' as

doctors by Edinburgh University. The activities and efficiency of African students associations increased through the first three decades of the twentieth century. The need to protest against unjust racial practices continued to occupy significant attention. Alliances among different Black students and activist associations were not uncommon since to a large extent they all stood for justice, and racial equality. The list of influential Black student association is long and would run into many pages. The widely known include the West African Students Union (WASU), (formed out of four preexisting students' association) in 1925. One interesting thing, and of course a coincidence about the acronym—WASU—is the way it was domesticated into various African languages and cultures and how the domestication further enhanced its power, popularity, mission, and activities. For instance, in Yoruba, WASU can be rendered as "to preach;" Efik, "to wipe off ones disgrace" and in Igbo, "to speak first in one's own interest." The association used its journals to express views related to the treatment of African students in British universities, the colonial situation and international politics in general. WASU editors joined the international committee in condemning Hitler's treatment of non-Aryan. One of the popular quotations of the period is:

Nationalism on the lines of Hitlerism or Nazism is nothing less than fanaticism ... Germany under the rule of Hitler is now following the wake of the blood-hunting savage Whites of the Southern States of the United States of America, by murdering and tormenting Jews, and ill treating Negroes and Indians, or rather people who have been unfortunate enough to be non-Aryan."¹⁹

Another equally volatile journal, *The Negro Worker* proved a good substitute. The newspaper had a Marxist orientation and criticized the British government for poor management of the resources and labor of the entire British Empire. Its members and reporters cut across geographical regions—Africa,

¹⁸ J.F. Ade. Ajayi, "Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian Nationalism," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 11, no. 2 (1962): 196–210.

¹⁹ Roderick J. Macdonald, "The wisers who are far away: The role of London Black Press in the 1930s and 1940s," in Gundara and Duffied (eds.), 153.

the West Indies and the United States of America. At various times, the journal was published in Hamburg, Copenhagen, and Paris. Throughout the 1930s, its circulation was prohibited and in order to allow the paper to reach the targeted readership and pass police scrutiny, copies were bound into religious tracts.²⁰ Other well-known publications of the period included, the *Keys*, published by the League of Coloured Peoples in London, and the *International African Opinion*, published by the International African Service Bureau.

to British literature and Arts is commendable—the philosophical and thought provoking ideas of Olaudah Equiano, Edward Wilmot Blyden, James Africanus B. Horton among others point to the high degree of intellectual productivity of people of African origin. The fact that Blacks were able to overcome social, political, and economic hurdles testifies to their creative ingenuity, and invalidates the pseudo-intellectual positions that are intellectually inferior to people of other races, especially Whites.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Blacks in Britain since the earliest times have continued to change in accordance with domestic and international developments. Although laws that criminalized racial prejudice and discrimination exist, Blacks continued to be covertly and overtly racialized. The legacies of slave trade and slavery is unimaginable and have served as one of the most significant factors that dictate the pattern of inter-racial relations in Britain. It is significant to add that slave trade and slavery and its attendant consequences which reflected largely in the form of dehumanization of the Black race does not constitute the totality of the experience of Black people in Britain. Blacks served in the Roman army and were both seamen and porters in prominent British seaport. They acquired western education and expressed their ideas about race and inequality using available channels and outlets. They were not sacred cow in the face of oppression or mis-representation of their identity and historical experience. The contributions of Black

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.