

People of African Descent, Who Are We?

By Joel Winful
Contributor

Hello, my fellow American brothers and sisters of African descent. The days of Coloreds and Negroes are behind us. But tell me, are we Blacks, African-Americans, Afro-Americans, or maybe even. Afros?! You may say "oh no, not that topic again," but the issue remains to be solved. Let's define ourselves as a group, before someone else does.

Many people, myself included, feel that we can do with a better name than just blacks. In both literature and custom, the word black has symbolized death, night, sadness and or evil, for ages. Pardon me for saying so, but the word black will probably always continue to carry those connotations. The usage of the word is not a racist plot; actually it has little to do with us as a people, directly. Regardless, we people of African descent do tend to get offended by this negative baggage being associated with "our race." When a New York Times writer says, "It was a black day on the stock market today, the Dow fell 52 points in low trading," many of us feel anger inside.

I say let the name go. Our people are struggling with lots of other negative images already, why hold on to a name that just heaps on loads more? The name doesn't do us justice, it lacks a geographical, cultural or historical identity. What it doesn't lack is a vast amount of negative imagery which dates back to ancient times. Why should we short change ourselves? Let's face up to it, White Americans aren't just white. They are "White" only in relation to us being "Black." True, their group name also lacks any cultural significance; but most Whites know their history, and their ethnic origins, whether Irish, German, Polish, or Italian, however distant they may now be. On the other hand, we of African descent do not know our heritage. Can we afford to have a name as insignificant as a mere color? Really, look on any important documents you might fill out; Hispanics and Latinos aren't "Browns," Orientals and Asians aren't "Yellows," Native Americans aren't "Reds!" It would reduce them to mere crayons, and frankly I don't think they would stand for it, they are too culturally aware and proud to define themselves in relation to the White person's label. But we go on with our worn out, self-imposed, crayon wrapper.

What of the name African-American? Definite geographical and historical ties exist in the name. However, some people insist that Americans of African descent are so far removed from Africans, that the name says and presumes too much, it makes them uneasy. Well what of the name Afro-Americans? It shows the historical linkage to Africa, but in a somewhat toned down manner. That name also allows room for the fact that, yes we are of African descent, but many of us do have other races mixed in as well. Some opponents of the term Afro-American, think it doesn't say enough, others feel that it is simply linking our race to an outdated hairstyle.

Many of us like the argument that both Afro-Americans and African-Americans are both too long to say and write, so we prefer Blacks. Well under that premise, what about something short yet positives, or at least not negatives. How about Afams, short for African-Americans? Possibly, Homies, Souls, Funkies, Darks, Cools, Prouds, Buppies, or maybe we should check the box that says "Other." The point I am making is, I don't feel we should choose shortness over substance when deciding our group's name. I wouldn't mind if we called ourselves DePees, short for Dark People, if we could come to some consensus of agreement on it. We just need something new, and preferably positive to call

ourselves. I will use the term African-American in my writing until a decision has been reached. Maybe the Diaspora (dy-as-pora) can show you why I prefer to use that term.

The Diaspora is the spreading out of people from their land of native origin, to countries all around the world. It follows, in the Diaspora framework that no matter where the people from the original country, in this case Africa, were relocated or settled, they shared many common experiences. These experiences can and should be tied together into a larger global view, or understanding of the group of people in question.

There are several characteristics that are uniting factors in the experiences of African people in the Diaspora. Firstly, in most areas in the Diaspora, people of African descent have been exposed to quite severe treatment and thorough western cultural



indoctrination; but cultural linkages have survived nevertheless. Examples of these linkages are seen in African-American extended families, and methods of religious worship. Another common experience most African descendants have been involved with is the struggle against political and economic suppression. Nearly all of them, worldwide, have had to fight very hard to gain rights, or to create a political voice for change within their new society. Thirdly, and most importantly, people in the African Diaspora usually have sources of dual or multiple personal identity. Sometimes this sense of dual belonging is referred to as being bicultural. The primary source of identity will undoubtedly be with the country that they reside in, or are a citizen of. The secondary source of identity, usually to African or African-influenced customs, is important to the person on more of an individual basis; and may become more important to the person

from time to time.

Throughout American history, because of eurocentric viewpoints, historians failed to see the validity existent in the established cultures of indigenous African groups. Africans, brought to the U.S. as slaves, were thought to be heathen and needed to be westernized. When one group sets out to change another group's culture, instead of mutually benefiting from both cultures, there will be unavoidable conflict. I believe this to be the case, even if one group genuinely desires to "uplift" or "save the souls of" the other, there will still be conflict; regardless of religious beliefs, and good intentions.

In the state of Virginia, home of Thomas Jefferson, third president 1801-1809; James Madison, fourth president 1809-1817; and James Monroe, fifth president 1817-1825; the issue of what to do with African-Americans was a matter of prime concern in the early 1800's. As a matter of fact, in the early 1800's, 40 percent of all African-Americans in the U.S. lived in the state of Virginia. All of the formerly mentioned Virginians were staunch supporters of plans to rid the U.S. of African-Americans by deportation. Patrick Henry, another revered statesman from Virginia, expressed the concerns of many people when he said in the 1780's, "Our country will be peopled. The question is shall it be with Europeans or with Africans?" My answer to Patrick Henry's question is: it has been peopled with both of the above, but mostly with Americans. His was such a worry by the mid 1800's, that an African colony, Liberia, was created as a place to return American slaves. It was founded during James Monroe's presidency, and its capitol Monrovia, is named after him.

I believe that it is quite ironic, and somewhat astounding that 200 years after Patrick Henry's poignant statements, things unfolded as they have today. In November 1989, the state of Virginia elected L. Douglas Wilder, as the first African-American governor in the U.S. history. Ironic that this happened in the birthplace of the effort to rid the U.S. of African-Americans. That twist of events just shows the unpredictability of history. It also illustrates how the African Diaspora framework can be used to help one understand and appreciate the events in our world, and how we indeed fit in.

Just as the Diaspora showed us that previous, somewhat pleasant irony, it also reveals troubling ones. Arising from the long standing historical contempt for Africa, is a very sad aspect of the African Diaspora: the problem of stratification of people of African descent by color within societies. This problem still exists in the U.S. today, and is present in other places as well. A sociologist looking at the situation commented, "It is no less ironic for all its inevitability that [African-Americans], who were and who remain the prime subjects of color discrimination, adopted color as an index of social worth." People of African descent in western societies have found that power and freedom were represented by white, and slavery and frustration were represented by black, therefore color became a visual status indicator. Among our own people, lighter on the scale became praised, and darker became resented. The underlying evil present in this hypothesis, as well as within African-American society must be confronted and dismantled. Black, Colored, Afro-American, Negro, light, medium, and dark, brothers and sisters, we need to work toward group unity! Only then can African-Americans get past minute issues like finding an appropriate name, and unite to address the larger problems facing us all, and strive to be the most successful human beings that we can be.

Joel K. Winful is a senior Political science/African Studies major from Atlanta, GA