

# **DON'T BAME ME**

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Just before the lockdown, my granddaughter came home from school one day very upset and confused. That afternoon, a classmate sitting at her table suddenly announced that from now on we will all call Anna (not her real name) 'nigger'. They are both 10 and British white and African respectively. Anna remonstrated with him and one of her mates, white, insisted that she should tell the teacher. In a discussion that ensued later, questions were asked about what the school was doing about race and one adult added 'especially as there are so few Bame students in the school'. Anna had no clue as to what Bame meant and when she was told, she asked why it mattered that there were few students like her in the school, given the fact that it was the white boy who had used the racial slur. When on reaching home she called to tell me about it, I found it considerably less problematic to explain to her the origins and usage of 'the n-word' than that of Bame.

So, here is a British born child, confident in her own skin, unapologetic about her blackness and totally comfortable with her white classmates having sleep overs at her home and vice versa, being made to feel that she was a problem; a problem that required the school to deal with the issue of race; being made to feel that if she had not been there, the white boy would not have had cause to call anybody 'nigger' and the school would have had no need to concern itself with race.

But, that school had long demonstrated to her that it saw no need to concern itself with race, not least by virtue of the fact that nothing in its library or displayed on its walls sent out to students, teachers or parents that there were people in Britain, let alone the world, other than white people like themselves.

So, why was it was more difficult to explain the origin and use of the word 'nigger' than that of the hideous and equally demeaning acronym BAME?

How does a parent tell a 10 year old that by virtue of the colour of her skin, by virtue of the fact that she is melanin rich, she is rendered 'other' and racialised as 'black' and as 'nigger' as the worst and most contemptible embodiment and existential manifestation of black? How does a parent equip that child with the mental energy, the self esteem, the self confidence and the determination to defend her essential humanity and make sure that no one takes liberties with her and denigrate her on account of her blackness?

And, while her parents are building with and within her those essential tools for resistance and survival, what are the parents of her white classmates doing to ensure that they are not being socialised within the putrid culture of racism in Britain to become racist oppressors, whether by commission or omission?

**So, what is the context of this conversation about the terminology we use to denote racial identity and to denote ethnicity?**

The context I suggest is the racialisation of difference and of different populations across the globe; racialisation of people, their ethnicity, their history, their culture and cultural products. Such racialisation has been the historical function of imperialism and colonialism and with it has evolved a language that serves the purpose of underpinning racial hierarchies and trapping those at or near the bottom of the hierarchy in mindsets and ways of being and of self perception that correspond to those hierarchies.

We ignore the relationship between language, power and identity to our peril. Words matter. They convey deep meanings and they help to frame identities. They are the medium through which we give expression to our existential reality and through which others seek to deny, denigrate and negate our existential reality.

Before I arrived in Britain in 1964 aged 19, I had not heard the word 'coloured' used to describe African people except in the specific context of apartheid in South Africa. As a teenager, I was deeply affected by reading Alan Paton's, *'Cry, the Beloved Country'*. So, when I heard white people and even Caribbean people calling other Caribbean people like myself 'coloured', I was quite alarmed. And then I read Stokeley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's 'Black Power' and I learnt about the Negritude Movement and I read James Baldwin, Claude Mackay, Ralph Ellison and saw images of Black Panther and civil rights marches and of Jim Crow barbarism as African Americans struggled against state racism in the USA.

I found it interesting that the bestial British who for centuries had treated African people worse than they did animals had suddenly converted to humanity, such that they were insisting that it was not just impolite but downright offensive to call us 'black'. We were being condemned for using our supplementary schools to teach 'Black Power'. Black was considered to be associated with violence, armed resistance against the state

and its apparatuses and generally with a radical and revolutionary mindset. 'Coloured' was more consensual and conformist and in any event, it made white folk feel better, except of course when they were ready to cuss us. I've never heard the racial slur 'you coloured bastard'.

No, we got the full monty, including and especially from the police: 'You black bastard'.

And then, the contorted language of race relations brought us ethnic minorities and black and ethnic minorities. This gave rise to a protracted debate about whether we were ethnic minority or minority ethnic. That debate completely missed the point, i.e., a) that whether 'ethnic minority' or 'minority ethnic', we were consenting to being minoritized and 'othered' for all time and that we were considered and treated as 'minority', not just in relation to our 'per capita' representation in the population as part of the African and the Asian Diaspora, but minority in intelligence, in capabilities, in moral values, in our contribution to human evolution, etc. The society which automatically valued and validated white folk, began to demand that we prove ourselves and demonstrate that we had the capacity to hold certain positions before we could be accepted as eligible for appointment to a wide spectrum of posts; b) that as far as ethnicity was concerned, we were not just ethnic minorities, we were ethnic outcasts, vying with other ethnic minorities like ourselves and scrambling for crumbs and handouts from those in power, who were always facing a potential backlash from the white majority who saw us as undeserving and as taking what should have been given to them.

No one ever spoke or wrote about the ethnic majority in the society and how they engaged with their racial and ethnic identity. People and things were only ethnic when they were, or were related to, people and cultures that were not white. It is as if we had come into a land of ethnic neutrality and cultural homogeneity and were clumps of trees in vast forests of melanin starved corn; in other words, a population of people without colour (PWC) in more ways than one.

In time, those halcyon days when black denoted struggle of the sort that African people had waged for centuries against enslavement, colonisation and neo-colonialism and therefore was thought to encompass liberation struggles, broadly speaking, of oppressed and dispossessed peoples everywhere, including against the caste system in the Indian subcontinent, against Israeli occupation of Palestine and against the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia, those halcyon days gave way to a far narrower definition of black as signifying African – as in Africa and its Diaspora -, with most diasporan Africans seeing themselves as having either a hyphenated identity, - African-American, African-Caribbean, French-African – and many emphatically rejecting their African heritage altogether. Among the latter are significant numbers of Caribbean people of all ages, who while being comfortable with being called Black would never call themselves and resent being called African. In other words, they have no time whatsoever for Peter Tosh's famous declaration:

***‘Don’t care where you come from  
As long as you’re a black man, you’re an African’***

Asians in Britain determined that they were not Black and they were no ‘ethnic minority’ either. In time, BME morphed into Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). BAME is a hideous acronym and it is one that does no justice to any of the sections of the British population encompassed by that ill-defined term. Black is an umbrella classification for whom exactly? Black African? Black British of African and of Caribbean parentage? Black British of African, or Caribbean and white European parentage? How about the large Indo-Caribbean population of Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago, almost as numerous as the African-Caribbean population? In Britain, are they and their offspring Black Caribbean, or are they Asian as in BAME?

And what do we understand by Asian? What does that umbrella classification encompass? People from the Indian subcontinent only, as in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh? People from the Indian Ocean? People from South East Asia and the countries that form the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN): Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos? People from China? People from Taiwan?

And if ‘Asians’ as in BAME signify people from the Asian continent and its Diaspora, why are people from the African continent and its Diaspora represented as ‘Black’ in BAME? I would suggest that ‘Black’ in that context has less connotations of Black as in “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” than as black representing historical enslavement, reserve pools of labour, endless struggle for fundamental rights and entitlements and from the bondage of endemic racism. Black is NOT a nation or a region anywhere in the world?

As for ethnic minority/minority ethnic, we have to lead the way in abandoning this terminology.

The population of Europe’s ethnic majority, ie, white Europeans, is roughly 748 million. The population of the Indian subcontinent alone is approximately 1 billion, 765 million. 25% of the world’s population live in South Asia. Whites make up 60% of the population of the USA. The UK has a population of 68 million, of whom 9 million are non-white.

There is no evidence that I have seen of people from the Asian or African Diaspora regarding themselves as ethnic minorities in Britain. On the contrary, migrant and settler communities from those continents project anything but a minority consciousness. Yet, we readily adopt and persist with a language of hierarchy and of oppression, both here and in the USA. Among the bewildering array of terms that are

in increasingly regular usage in Britain are: People of Colour; Black and Non-Black People of Colour and more recently Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC).

Who determined that Black or Indigenous people are ethnic minorities? Even numerically, why are we minoritizing ourselves who constitute 85% at least of the world's population? Nigeria has a population of over 200 million. Britain has a population of 68 million. Why should Nigerians see themselves as an ethnic minority in Britain or anywhere else in Europe?

And as for 'People of Colour' or 'Visible Minorities', why are we defining ourselves against globalised whiteness as some assumed norm and minoritizing ourselves as if we don't fully belong, especially given Europe's historical exploits around the globe?

There are little and large enclaves of white folk all over the world and on each continent. They never define themselves, nor do we ever define them, as 'ethnic minorities'. We call them and they refer to themselves as 'expats', expatriates from their homeland who happen to be in some other country (typically seen as inferior to theirs). In other words, people are only 'ethnic' and 'minority' when they are not white. And yet, we fail to see how we ourselves are privileging whiteness as the 'norm' when we call ourselves 'people of colour', 'ethnic minorities' and the rest.

BAME is bad enough, but BIPOC for heaven's sake.... So, we tacitly and implicitly accept that 'white' is a unified concept, all embracing, all encompassing. No diversity, ethnic minorities or multiculturalism in the white majority. It's one undifferentiated, melanin starved mass. When it comes to us, however, we are BAME, POC, BIPOC, non-White .....and Backward.

If African people are People of Colour, why deny white Europeans the privilege of being called '*People without Colour*', in other words, not having to carry the burden of blackness with all its historical baggage of unacceptability and undesirability?

The critical question in all this is: When is it going to end? It is estimated that in less than 50 years, the non-white population of Britain will outnumber the melanin starved, the WIPONC (White and Indigenous People of No Colour). Do we have to wait until then before we Africans and Asians develop and project a majority consciousness and stop minoritizing ourselves? Meanwhile, what does BAME tell us about the way the diverse populations we group as Black and Asian and Minority Ethnic experience the society and its endemic racisms? Do Indians, Bangladeshis, Chinese and Malaysians experience the society and its institutions in identical ways? Do they have equal access and equal opportunity? Similarly, those of us Africans who are lumped together as 'Black'?

Convenient though policymakers no less than academics and journalists find it to use BAME and POC, I believe that we have a duty to disrupt the hegemony of that language and its power to racialise, marginalise and exclude.

For one thing, young Black British people such as my children and grandchildren need a home. They need to see themselves as being the continuum of an Ancestral line, as having an African ancestry. Britain is where they live, but it can never be their 'home'. Their 'Mother country' is Africa. While we believe in people's right to self-identify and that therefore, Caribbean people have a right to declare that they are not African or Asian, or British for that matter, we would all consider it rather bizarre if they all started calling themselves Innuits.

I have no idea, any more than you do, how long it would take before we abandon the language of BAME and POC and BIPOC. But, we can all start by taking responsibility to avoid using it in our speech and in our writing. Although many regard it as being equally problematic, I increasingly use terms such as Global Majority, or African and Global Majority, instead of BAME. I never ever use 'People of Colour', for as far as I am concerned there is no difference between being called a person of colour, or a 'woman of colour' and a 'coloured woman'.

Problematic it may be, but psychologically it nurtures my sense of wellbeing in this racist society to define myself and my offspring as African and Global Majority, rather than endorsing the label of BAME and POC.

I rest my case.

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