



**ZANZIBAR CONFERENCE
SOME NOTES ON RACE AND IDENTITY IN AFRICA***

*This is not a paper in any sense of the word; only a collection of random thoughts to stimulate discussion. Even this may be an unsustainable presumption.

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1. "Race is dead in biology, but survives in culture" ¹(Kohn). It is ironic that the more scientific progress is made demonstrating that the concept of race is devoid of substance and explanatory value, the more obstinately it persists as an issue in politics and social discourse.
2. The social constructs around the concept of race develop a career of their own and shape patterns of interaction and individual and group identities. ²(Appiah) In this sense, Zaniecki's dictum is appropriate. "If people define things as real, they become real in their consequences." ³ (Thomas and Zaniecki)
3. When we try to understand the phenomenon of race in the cultural context, we explore the consequences of racial constructs on social relations. In this context "racism is the ideology that people defined as belonging to different races, are superior/inferior in terms of intellectual, physical etc. skills and abilities."
4. Paradoxically, the wave of anti-racist movements since World War 2 has often reinforced racism by assuming that because race is scientifically meaningless, it was socially non-existent. This politically correct preoccupation with non-racialism often led to the ignoring of factors that shaped race as a social construct and removed it from the agenda of policy and state action. The intellectual contortions around the pro's and con's of affirmative actions, (i.e. using race to remove racial inequalities), is evidence of this. (Appiah and Gutman) Justice is sacrificed for correctness and reinforces injustice.
5. The cultural phenomenon of science as a mode of intellectual inquiry, is also abused to reinforce racism.
 - 5.1 There are those who argue that science proves that race is irrelevant but then insist that scientific research proves that racial differences are relevant. ⁴(Hernstein and Murray)

¹ Kohn, Marek: *The Race Gallery: The Return of Racial Science*, Vintage, 1996

² Appiah, K A and Gutman, A: *Colour Conscious*, Princeton University Press, 1996

³ Thomas and Zaniecki: *the Polish Peasant in America*

⁴ Hernstein, R and Murray, C: *The Bell Curve*, The Free Press, 1994

- 5.2 There are those who insist that race is scientifically relevant in order to promote racist ideologies, e.g. white and black racial pseudo science.
- 5.3 There are those who claim scientific status for conceptual tools of questionable explanatory value, e.g. "White or Black psyche", "racial subconscious", "collective mind", "Afro- or Euro centric" etc., and attempt to give intellectual respectability to basically racist socio-historical explanations.
- 5.4 Post modernistic relativism dismisses the relevance of science altogether and in "celebrating diversity", reinforces the idea that people from difference racial groups have fundamentally incompatible and mutually inaccessible cultures that make communications futile.

In all of the above, "the respectability" and authority of science is appropriated or attacked to promote racism, either by design or default.

- 6. The socio-political abuse of race as a generic social construct is related to, and overlaps with another generic social construct, namely "identity". Not in the sense of self conscious introspection, but one of socio-cultural labeling and identification. This is the basis for minorities and the ideas related to pluralism, multi-culturalism, nationalism and ethnicity. Within the boundaries of the modern nation state group identities can manifest themselves as homogenous nations, minorities in super-subordinate relations towards one another or as trans-national religious communities, e.g. the Nation of Islam (⁵Ra-Anaan) ⁶Gellner states bluntly that the ideology of nationalism "is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist." ⁷Benedict Anderson simply refers to all of the above as "imagined communities".
- 7. Because of the pervasiveness of minorities and their increasing salience after the collapse of organized communism, ⁸Kymlicka argues for a Bill of Minority Rights, similar to a Bill of Human Rights to counteract the potential for ethnic violence in deeply divided societies. It is argued that permanently excluded minorities pose the greatest challenge to the successful consolidation of liberal democracies. (Stepan) Particularly, since it has become evident that the modernizing ideologies of capitalism and socialism have not realized their egalitarian promises and diminished the sense of ethno-nationalist entitlement.
- 8. As with race, the phenomenon of cultural minorities, groups, nations etc., is presented as "primordially real" or "as various social constructs". Again, it is the consequences of such constructs for patterns of social interaction rather

⁵ Ra-Anaan, U: "The National State Fallacy" in Montville, J.V.: conflict and Peacemaking in Multi-ethnic Soceties, Lexington Books, 1990

⁶ Gellner, Ernst: Thought and Change, Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1964

⁷ Anderson, B: Imagined Communities, Verso, 1983

⁸ Kymlicka, W: Multicultural Citizenship, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995

than their claim of scientific validity that is more relevant. However, the phenomenon of group identity: Jews, Masai, Hutus, Afrikaners, presents an additional complication. No serious scholar would argue that there is a demonstrable correspondence between a racial category, e.g. White, Black etc., and a single homogenous culture; despite attempts at demonizing all Whites and "ubuntifying" all Blacks, or presenting all Whites as oppressors, and all oppressed as Black. But the relationship between genetics and cultural minorities is far more problematical than between race and culture.⁹ (Jones) If the culture is Xenophobic and ethnically exclusive, and reinforcing sexual and marital taboos, then over time, a process of genetic selection and predisposition is inevitable. Certain physical features become identified with certain cultural minorities. "You look like a Jew, Masai, etc." This is, of course, an extremely variable phenomenon and can cover a wide range of possibilities, e.g. Nordic, Latino, Germanic appearances. This phenomenon, more than any other feeds back into racial and minority constructs.

9. It is so, that **within** the same racial construct a wider diversity of cultural predispositions can be found than **between** racial constructs. It is worth researching whether conflict is more intense when racial and cultural minority constructs correspond, than when ethnic conflicts occur **within** the same racial construct. Most likely ethnic conflicts will prove to be more intense/intractable than racial conflicts, e.g. Serb-Croat, Hindu-Moslem, Hutu-Tutsi, Albanian-Serfs, Protestant-Catholic, Moslem-Jew, Orthodox-Modern Islam.
10. One of the consequences of the collapse of Marxist scholarship, particularly in the USA and Europe, has been a descent into postmodernist relativism. Epistemologically, this position endorses the impossibility of sensible communication between people and reduces all attempts to a senseless wailing of inaccessible narratives. (Gellner) Those who support this position, obviously do not know what I am talking about, and even doubt whether I do myself). Intellectually it has led to a rediscovery, and celebration of 'diversity' and American campuses are awash with 'cultural studies' and Afro-American curricula. (A lucrative and prestigious haven for the growing number of racial and ethnic academic entrepreneurs.) Diversity cannot be understood, nor its potential conflict facilitated, (unless of course you belong to the same construct), it has to be proclaimed and affirmed, and reorganized into a contest for power and resources. (Kohn)
11. Some trace the origins of this Afrocentric faith to Africa.¹⁰ (Diop, Asante, Bernal) The self-serving historiography of Afrocentric scholarship, is the mirror image of white self-serving historiography – Colonial superiority is

⁹ Jones, S: *the Language of the Genes: Biology, History and the Evolutionary Future*, Harper Collings, 1993

¹⁰ Diop, C.A.: *Civilisation or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, Lawrence Hill Books, 1991
Asante, M.K.: *Afrocentricity: The theory of Social change*, Amulefi, Buffalo, 1980

counteracted with post-colonial victimology and Black superiority. (The origin of civilization, science, maths, etc. is Africa, which is Black). This is currently very fashionable in "black" intellectual circles in South Africa. History is reduced to an endless moral pantomime – those on the one side are all bad, confronted by those on the other side, who are all good. Even some reputable scholars have their cake and eat it. Whilst denying the scientific relevance of social/ideological constructs such as race, nation etc., they demand collective moral culpability from all those they wish to classify in terms of these constructs.

12. It is in this intellectual climate that problems of race and identity have to be investigated, in Africa, and anywhere else. Pervasive irrationality has once again become fashionable. It is a tradition that can be traced back to the debates between Socrates and Protagoras. (Fernandez-Arnesto) It is not difficult to become pessimistic at the prospect of anything constructive emerging from the fashionable chattering classes of academia, gripped in self imposed constraints of pseudo profound constructs around race and identity, whether in the USA, Eastern, Central Europe or Africa. Most likely, and again, it will be ordinary folk who will suffer the consequences, and through their suffering and fortitude, expose the fallacies and practical irrelevance, of convictions that parade as non demonstrable truths.