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The Brotherhood of Blackness II

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University of Ibadan
Ibadan, NigeriaMr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Jean Genet's play of biting commentary on the real nature of the relationships between the world's black and white people, The Blacks, has been running in New York for more than two years. Appallingly, the flow of anguish that lies at the heart of most white and black contacts still runs strong after more than four centuries of slavery, genocide, colonialism, apartheid, and segregation; forms of that racism H. G. Wells once described as "the worst single thing in life", possessing "more baseness, cruelty and abomination than any sort of error in the world." One of the most recent and most vile acts of anguish was the murder of four Negro children in Birminham, Alabama; murders which revolted and angered white men, murders which revolted and angered black men, but also bitterly reminded them once again of the ineluctable nature of their unsought bonds of black brotherhood.

One of Genet's characters puts the stubborn reality into words: "No, one can't hold all.... responsible for the death.... Nevertheless, there's no denying the fact that one of you is guilty.... He killed out of hatred. Hatred of color.... That was tantamount to killing our entire race and killing us till doomsday." The death of the Birmingham children is just another link in the brotherhood-making chain of atrocities that extends back across the centuries to the Atlantic slave trade.

"When our slaves are aboard we shackle them two by two, while we lie in port, and in sight of their own country, for 'tis then they attempt to make their escape, and mutiny", wrote Captain Thomas Phillips in a description one of his slave gathering

expeditions along the Guinea Coast in 1693.* In spite of such precautions captured Africans frequently did manage to mutiny, and occasionally escape. For those who did not, there was the terrifying "Middle Passage" and the ultimate degradation and horror of a life time of slavery for themselves, their children and their children's children.

After decades of bloodshed and the ignoble death of thousands, the iron shackling of black men "two by two" came to an end. By this time, however, slavery had broken cultures, destroyed identities and crushed racial memories. Such social devastation is in the nature of slavery, but where nature was remiss, the slavers themselves deliberately employed the knives of separation and the cudgels of moral insensibility to destroy black men's healthy sense of themselves and each other. Nowhere were they more successful than in America, where eventually, the only community the one-time Africans fully possessed was the community of negroness with its attendant attributes of self-shame and inferiority; a community which to this day broods and festers between hope and hopeless fury.

For the millions of Africans who were not caught and stamped cargo for the dismal and filthy "trade", another form of shackling lay in wait, European colonialism, well labeled by Nigeria's President, Nnamdi Azikiwe, as a "dingy prison". Invading Africa, the white men of Europe persuaded, forced, or tricked black men into laboring on great plantations or into burrowing deep into the ground for mineral wealth.

By superior force and other blessings of civilization they set themselves above the "natives" and proceeded to break cultures and shatter identities. However, the African at home, unlike his kidnapped bretheren, was able to preserve much of his culture and social organization. Colonialism and empire building, at least as practiced by the British and French, werenot coterminous with slavery. The colonial record of the Belgians and thePortuguese argues that for them the two forms of racial subjugation were one and the same.

*Daniel Mannix and Malcom Cowley, Black Cargoes (London: Longmans, 1963.)

On numerous occasions the British and the French have also found it satisfying to ignore the differences in kinds of racial subjugation. The British found it so in Jamaica in 1865*. Following an abortive revolt by a handful of Jamaican Negroes, British troops butchered and tortured some 1500 men, women and children. (The Birmingham killings are a continuing part of the historical evidence that black people can never count on childhood as a refuge from racism.) One British officer gleefully reported that one of his fellows was doing "a splendid service shooting every black man who cannot account for himself" and that another was "hanging like fun by court-martial."

Now let me stipulate that I am aware of a broad pattern of virtues and assets introduced into Africa under the British and French form of racial subjugation. Let me further state that I am aware that Africans did sell other Africans to white men, and that it was primarily white men who put an end to a horrible trade brought to its peak by white men. All this, and any other exceptions, does not change the fundamentally, universally and historically negative nature of the prolonged contacts between white men and black men, contacts in which white men have invariably been the ones who introduced the racist argument of their own uniquely racial superiority.

Over the years by constantly lashing black men with the whip of white supremacy and "European civilization", thousands of white men have re-shackled separated black men "two by two" in ironic and painful brotherhood, whether inside their own country or inside a new country.

James Baldwin[#], in an essay on the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris in 1956 made clear the nature of the emotional shackles shared by vastly differing black men:

" There was something which all black men held in common, something which cut across opposing points of view, and placed in the same context their widely dissimilar experience. What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake

* Bernard Semmel, Jamaican Blood and Victorian Conscience, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1963)
James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, (New York: The Dial Press, 1961)

the world in their own image, to impose that image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be."

And so when four black children were slaughtered in America, apparently by Negro-hating white men, it was not surprising that Africans felt this "was tantamount to killing our entire race and killing us till doomsday".

In a deeply emotional letter to the American Consul in Nigeria's Western Region, Remi Fani-Kayode, Deputy Premier of the Region, revealed his profound understanding of black men's shared "shackles". There is no doubt that his letter really does speak for "millions of black men.... all over the world":

"I shall be exceedingly grateful if you will do me the service of conveying through your Ambassador, my sincerest sympathy to the relatives of the four Negro children who were brutally murdered when attending a religious service in a Negro church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 16, 1963

"I can assure you that my expressed sympathy is only a little vent, a little indication of the compressed and suppressed feelings of millions of my country men and other black men all over the world on the atrocities committed.

"I am compelled to send this message publicly through you because the mental suffering I undergo whenever I read of the increasing brutalities and bestialities of white men to black men, black women and black children in the United States of America is really becoming unbearable.

"Again I can assure you that millions of black men like myself all over the world feel these mental blows with increasing intensity and resentment and we have received just about enough punishment without public reaction.

"The determination and positive action of the Kennedy Government in the United States in fighting against apartheid, injustice and discrimination in the United States of America has so far been the check on the forceful expressions of our feelings on the depravities of white racists in America and a curb to our responsive reactions to white Americans within our shores: but the tensions created by these racialists is getting to the breaking point.

"It is regrettable to note that the more the American Government succeeds in bringing our African Governments closer and closer to the Government of the United States, the more the racialists of the United States show quite clearly that it will yet take many life times to bring white America and black people

anywhere near the borders of friendship.

"We in Nigeria can so far only pray for the Negroes in the United States in this their hour of distress and need and for you and your Government in your hour of great shame inflicted by shortsighted citizens of your country....."

The Deputy Premier's assurance that racial "blows" were being felt with "increasing intensity and resentment" suggests that a serious change in the character of the common "ache to come into the world as men" is now spreading in the black world. It implies the growth in West Africa of a dimension of racial emotion heretofore confined to the Negroes of America, the Africans of South Africa and the Africans who have had to live with appreciable numbers of white settlers, a dimension best articulated by that essayist of racial angst and love, James Baldwin.

"And there is", grieves Baldwin with horror in his Notes of a Native Son, "no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked, and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled".

It is as if the "great fear" foreshadowed in Alan Paton's Cry the Beloved Country is now taking root in free Africa, the fear "that one day when they turn to loving they will find we are turned to hating".

Compensatory hatred has not been a part of West Africa's response to its former confinement in the "dingy prison" of white colonialism. This form of subjugation, although galling in the extreme, did not inflict the abysmal and eternal wounds of slavery, segregation and apartheid. This lesser vassalage, in conjunction with the imperatives of modernity, has made reconciliation possible between the former white empire builders and their black ex-subjects. The spirit of the reconciliation, argues Fani-Kayode, is mutual interest and toleration, definitely not love, and not under-

standing.

In an interview with Institute Fellow James Brewer and myself, the Deputy Premier, a graduate of Cambridge University, recalled personal experiences with racially discriminating British landladies. He also remembered the prejudiced practices of colonial administrators in Nigeria. It was only now, however, with his country's independent development well on its way and his personal career in the ascendancy, unhampered by race, that he was experiencing, via the "brutalities and bestialities" of Birmingham, South Africa and Angola, the "mental blows" that lead to the "naked and unanswerable hatred" exposed by Baldwin.



JAMES BREWER AND DEPUTY PREMIER REMI FANI-KAYODE

For the first time, Fani-Kayode can conceive "that the world's next great conflict will be a racial conflict". He sees its long term seeds in the refusal of the "white NATO" alliance really to confront the racial ugliness of white South Africa and white Portugal, and in the racial overtones entwined in the ideological quarrel

between the "dark " Chinese and the "white" Russians.

The Reverend Ambrose Reeves, former Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, speaking at the United Nations' service in London echoed the Nigerian's apocalyptic tone. He perceives that "far more is at stake in South Africa than a conflict of ideas. If nations allow the present situation to continue, the chances are that the day will come when Africans in other parts of Africa will come to the aid of the non-white peoples in South Africa, with the result that a race war could begin in South Africa which might spread far beyond the borders of Southern Africa."

So it is that in the midst of their own full freedom and their growing sense of power that Africans are intensifying their emotive bonds with their separated bretheren in America and their still subjugated fellows in Africa. Modern communications, the end of colonial censorship, the common "ache", the desire for unity have set the shackles of other black men more firmly before their faces.

In a letter to me following the Birmingham murders, Adeniyi Williams, Chief Engineer of the University of Ibadan, affirmed his personal recognition of the existence in the modern world of an expanding sense of black racial identification. He wrote:

"I salute the Freedom fighters and their sympathizers, I salute their courage, I salute their determination and resourcefulness, I salute their restraint. Is there anything else required to convince their detractors that they have every right to full citizenship status? The way they have been conducting themselves in the face of extreme provocation has commanded the admiration and respect of people the world over, and especially of those of us in this great continent who are proud to call them brothers. We are all the way with them in this battle."

In turn the free-African example has intensified the freedom struggle in the remaining lands of segregation, apartheid and colonialism. The desperate and vicious efforts of some whites to hold on to positions of white-only-privilege will only increase and insure the rapid growth of a final tragic and horrible bond between black

men: hatred of white men.

Richard Wright, Baldwin's forerunner as the prophet of racial angst wrote a book angrily entitled, White Man, Listen!. In view of the growing African awareness of the common world wide degradation of blacks and in view of the growing armaments and physical power of black nations, the ~~book~~ now might well be labeled Black and White Man, Listen! In the last paragraphs he warned:

"The white man injected race feeling in Africa. And the easiest, the cheapest, the most vulgar, and the least worthy road that the African can travel is to become a racist like the white man, which would mean that the African has learned his lesson too bitterly and too well. To steer clear of the foul road of racism is not left to the decision of the African; too much pressure on him can take him down that road, and if he goes, and if the Asians follow him, then the vile logic of racism, which the white man helped to sow in this world, will grow and bear its blighted fruit.

"We have it within our will and power to see that that does not happen.

"Would it not be better to have continents of Asians and Africans wedded to practical goals than have them arming and mobilizing to make the world accept them as men? We make the world in which we live. So far we've made it a racist world. But surely such a world is not worthy of man as we dream of him and as we want him to be."

And certainly a world in which four children can be murdered for being white is no improvement over one in which four children have been murdered for being black.

Sincerely yours,

Charles J. Patterson
Charles J. Patterson

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