

Can a "White" South African be 'African'?-  
- academic power and delusions of post-Apartheid academia in SA  
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This question, can 'whites' be African, has arisen in various academic texts from South Africa. However it will be argued that despite the increased self awareness in the area of 'whiteness' studies (Twine & Gallagher, 2008) (Matthews, 2015) the discourse reveals an astonishing abuse of academic power and deliberate misreading and distortion.

**Prelude:**

We must first of all establish that 'African' is not an invention of Europeans. This colonial myth was established to suggest that natives knew nothing about each other and had no horizon outside their own 'tribes'. Scholars such as Ali Mazrui who certainly started life identifying not as African but as Arab could be quite complicit with anti-African theories. As Matthews, with considerable inaccuracy, writes (Matthews, 2018)

"As Ali Mazrui (1986) and V.Y. Mudimbe (1994) both emphasise, although in very different ways, the idea that there is a continent called "Africa" and people are called "Africans" is very much due to the decisions of European imperialists and cartographers who decided to label the continent and its people in this way. Furthermore, as Mazrui (1986: 25) notes, the usage of the term "African" was, from the outset, "bewilderingly ambivalent and ambiguous" in that it was not clear whether to be African was taken to mean to come from the continent called Africa or whether it was a racial term designating only those with dark skin." (p.6)

A basic sense of 'African' can be traced to ancient Egypt, ancient Meroe and ancient Ethiopia so I will not digress.

Secondly, and of equal importance it must be stressed that African-ness is not a geographical statement. It is only within the colonial mind that Africa becomes a geographic entity/statement. Africa is a spiritual and cultural place and space with a locus on what is today a particular continent. However 'Africa' can be created or instanced in any space that Africans recreate it, and it is this understanding that allows the African Union to declare the diaspora to be part of Africa, simpliciter.

**Being African:**

A first step is to understand that to be African is primarily but not exclusively to belong to one of the peoples that make up Africa. If you are born Igbo, Akan or Xhosa you have a strong presumption of Africanness. However if you were born in Brazil and return to Nigeria in the spirit of returning home you will be welcomed as an African.

For centuries there have been marriages with foreigners. Many people with white skins are accepted as Nigerian. Many proudly boast of their Nigerianness! We have many people whose skin is white whose fathers were Nigerian and mothers from Europe and vice versa. No one ever

suggests they are not Nigerian ( or Yoruba, Akan et al). Anthony Appiah's mother has always been accepted as an African despite Appiah's own personal reservations.

Further there are those who have fought for the liberation of Africa, some even with the armed forces of the liberation movements. Cuban soldiers who sought to settle in Angola were welcomed. So let it be made clear: any one who fought with the liberation movements is welcome to be African without question. Not only that their children are welcome to call themselves (if they choose) Africans. This will not be challenged throughout Africa whatever colour their skin is. The statement ' I/my father/my mother fought with MPLA, Umkhonto we Sizwe or Freelimmo' is equivalent to saying: "Romanus sum".

This issue, can whites be Africans, becomes a means by which South African scholars such as Matthews and Rudwick seek to trap young non academic South Africans into appearing racists and this is an abuse of academic power. This is particularly egregious where the Black students are named and abused and the white student comments are sympathetically analysed.

### **Ethnicity and nationality**

Almost immediately these South African scholars conflate ethnicity and nationality. Any one born in South Africa can make a claim to its nationality - that is not contested. Given that South Africa is a multi ethnic society these scholars never compare it to other multi ethnic societies. Britain is constituted of England, Wales and Scotland. One cannot by merely being British demand to be considered Scottish and call anyone who rejects the claim racist. Israel has an Arab population who can claim Israeli citizenship . They cannot however on the basis of Israeli citizenship claim to be Jewish.

Matthews quotes a student :

' to say because I am white I can't be African is blatant racism' (p.5)

No attempt is made to highlight the numerous category errors involved here, or the obfuscation between making a claim and the claim being accepted. The entirety of the discussion appears based on the idea that 'African' is a merely geographical statement.

If South Africa is a multi ethnic society then mere possession of nationality is not sufficient for acceptance in any particular ethnicity – whether that be Indian , Jewish, Boer or English. Could a Black South African unilaterally identify as Indian or English or Boer? Would not those communities wish to express an opinion or derision?

### **What is it to be African?**

South Africa can grant citizenship but it cannot force any other country to accept any one as African. Scholars such as Rudwick appear to believe this is a matter for debate among South Africans. Rudwick (Rudwick, 2015) writes:

"However, and importantly, the question of whether or not whites can (and should) identify as Africans cannot be separated from the bigger question of how we define Africanness." (p.82)

This is an astonishing statement, particularly the use of 'we'. Who is accepted as British is a matter for Britain and is an act of power, just as much as stripping someone of their nationality.

Who is accepted as Jewish is a matter for the Jewish community. There are people who can discuss who will be accepted as African and that class of people does not include Rudwick. It never occurs to these South African academics that one of the key areas of resistance is the presumption that 'whites' can self subscribe their identity unlike in any other case in the world.

### **Entitlement**

What South African academics also fail to highlight is that the request to be considered 'African' by whites in South Africa is a generally a claim to entitlements, a fear of loss of status. As Green (Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007) explains it:

"This resentment was based on a fear that whiteness was no longer in control in South Africa and that the 'other' had seized centre stage. As whiteness disintegrates, white students' moral, intellectual, and economic superiority can no longer be maintained on South African soil and they want to take flight physically or imaginatively." (p.404)

This entitlement claim is even more astonishing as it implies there are no obligations coming with an identity. Do these people who wish to be considered African, when outside of South Africa identify with other Africans? When they arrive in US or Europe do they promptly allocate themselves among 'whites'? If they saw an African being mal-treated at Newark Airport do they feel any connection? When asked by Europeans do they declare themselves simply African? As was made clear earlier, in Nigeria we have such people and no one ever suspects their claim to be Nigerian to be merely an entitlement claim. When they say they are Nigerian they take on all the consequences - good and bad! In my experience the majority of South Africans once in US or Europe dissolve into the 'white' world and have no connection to Africans from other countries.

### **Culture and spirit**

To suggest that one can be African but have no cultural connection to the peoples of Africa is breathtaking. No one would ever suggest that one could be European with no cultural connection to the peoples of Europe. Leo Varadkar is Irish Prime Minister and has Indian ancestry but he is thoroughly Irish. Kenya has many 'white' Kenyans and a 'white' Kenyan has been elected to parliament. Zambia had a 'white' President for a period. Consider a Chinese national who was born during a transit through Europe when his mother gave premature birth. If that was his only connection with Europe it is difficult to see anyone giving the question of whether he was European a moment's consideration.

### **CONCLUSION**

'African' is no different than any other identity. It cannot be self subscribed. To be African is to be accepted by all other Africans as African and not just by South Africans. When it comes to 'defining' what it is to be African that, I am afraid, is an act of power that requires potestas and jurisdiction even to meaningful engage in the discussion. It is unlikely that any of these South African scholars would feel that they could define 'who is a Jew' or 'who is French'. This subtle or not so subtle usurpation of power suggest that at least in the world of South African academia the role of 'white privilege' has yet to end.

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