

A K Appiah and the racism in his work: The endorsement of genocide - Part3

By

O A Ladimeji

African Century Journal

June 2019

In the first article of the series - Part 1- there was a focus on Appiah's key argument of 'In my father's House' that Pan-Africanism was a racist project. This argument distinguished Pan Africanism from Zionism on the basis that Zionism/Judaism had shared culture and was not simply based on race whereas Africans have no shared culture and any attempt to associate must therefore be solely on the basis of 'race'. Appiah wrote:

'There are varieties of each of 'nationalism' that make the basis lie in shared traditions, but however plausible this may be in the case of Zionism, which has, in Judaism, the religion, a realistic candidate for a common and non-racial focus for nationality, the peoples of Africa have a good deal less culturally in common than is usually assumed.'
(K. A. Appiah, 1992, p. 17)

However his argument that Crummell was a racist and based his idea solely on 'racial' grounds requires Crummell to believe that there was no shared culture between Africans. Since Crummell believed there was a shared culture the most Appiah could convict him of was factual error not racism.

In Part 2 there was a focus on a libellous repetition of a statement by Lord Monboddo quoted by Thomas Jefferson. Some may feel inclined to argue that such academic discussion is not libellous but this is unsound and without merit. In fact the academic circumstance by giving more credibility to the statement increases the libel. Firstly, if Appiah's statement had referenced directly any living person that person would have direct cause for action against Appiah and his publisher. While it is generally not possible to libel the dead, criminal libel laws may apply in that the statements may cause groups to be brought into disrepute and cause a likely present breach of the peace. Lord Monboddo's statements libel ALL African/Black women in a timeless manner and by suggesting that they welcome sexual advances by animals would likely encourage today serious breaches of the peace (assaults) which is sufficient to start the process for an action for criminal libel. Without any doubt such statements 'expose (African/Black women) to hatred, contempt, and ridicule' which has always been the basis for criminal libel. (Wagner & Fargo, 2015) See Note 1.

This article, the final part of the series, will focus on genocide. To understand the argument we need to start with some definitions. Raphael Lemkin invented the term and promoted its adoption. As Samantha Power explains in her introduction to his primary work:

"In Axis Rule he wrote that 'genocide' meant 'a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the

aim of annihilating the groups themselves'. The perpetrators of genocide would attempt to destroy the political and social institutions, the culture, language, national feelings, religion, and economic existence of national groups. They would hope to eradicate the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and lives of individual members of the targeted group. He continued:

'Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national patterns of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population which is allowed to remain, or upon the territory, alone, after removal of the population and colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals.'

Extermination was one means of destroying a group, but it was but one means. A group did not have to be physically exterminated to suffer genocide. They could be stripped of all cultural traces of their identity. "It takes centuries and sometimes thousands of years to create a natural culture," Lemkin wrote, "but Genocide can destroy a culture instantly, like fire can destroy a building in an hour." (Power, 2005, p. xxi)

We can see that the treatment of enslaved Africans brought to the US constituted genocide under Lemkin's terms. Their culture, identities and national processes were all deliberately destroyed. To support this or endorse the result would be to support genocide. We know that many Jewish communities concealed their Judaism and sometimes continued certain practices without understanding their meaning. This is prevalent in countries where there was some form of an inquisition. When such groups are now discovered the Jewish community would seek to reintroduce them back into the Jewish community and re-educate them about Jewish customs and their history. Were anyone to argue that these people had ceased to be Jewish, had hardly any real connection and should be left alone by the Jewish community it would be widely seen as a defence of the inquisition and of attempts at genocide, and an attempt to endorse the stripping of people's culture. That they had lost much of their culture was the result of violence and oppression and the situation called for repair and healing. These people were entitled to demand their culture back. Any other approach would be seen as endorsing genocide

However when the victims are former enslaved Africans it is held acceptable to argue that they no longer have their African culture and are now Americans/Brazilian. This is the attitude and approach Appiah takes. African Americans are no longer African because their culture has been deliberately stripped from them and they are not entitled to get it back. Such an attitude constitutes acceptance of the genocide or denial of the genocide. This is exactly how Appiah treats African Americans, by separating them from Africans on the basis that they no longer have anything in common.

However that is only count 1 of the indictment.

We know from the work of Park (Park, 2013) that Kant began erasing Africa from history and that this was part of his view that Africans had no place in the future of mankind, had no historical personality and were doomed to be wiped out (Ladimeji, 2019). This was a genocidal program involving the rewriting of previously accepted history which has been continued ever

since by a substantial body of western scholars. When Hugh Trevor-Roper claimed that there was no history in Africa, this was not an empirical statement, he was simply following the ground rules set by Kant. If Africans had no historical personality then all their activities were of no historical importance. Kant came to these beliefs by 'intuition' and not by any pretense of empirical evidence. Appiah continues this trope by arguing that there was little in Africa prior to arrival of Europeans and what literature there is has been a response to the encounter with Europe.

But to hold such a view requires specific forms of denial. It requires a firm denial of ancient Africa from ancient Egypt through Goa to ancient Ghana, Songhay and Mali. It requires a denial of the literatures and written sources of these periods. In order to defend the Western trope that there was nothing there of any importance before the arrival of Europeans there has to be specific denials. Appiah refers to all reference to a connection between modern Africa and ancient Egypt as delusional. Appiah refers to ancient Egypt as an 'imaginary history' for Africa (K. A. Appiah, 1992, p. 176) and simply ignores ancient Ethiopia and medieval Africa to paint a picture of an isolated Africa with no indigenous imperial history.

Astonishing, given his subject is identity, is Appiah's complete ignoring of medieval Africa and its relation to Islam, or the early pre islamic era kingdoms of Gao, followed by Ghana, Songhay and Mali of which there are considerable written sources. Bilad as Sudan, land of the blacks, reveals clearly a self definition of a population that already encountered white skinned muslims. Michael Gomez writes:

"The ninth/fifteenth -century shift in the political center of gravity from Mali to Songhay would usher in a new era of international relations, its dynamics characterized by intellectual vibrancy as well as social transformation. Imperial Songhay represents a height of West African cultural efflorescence and political imagination, its success characterised by novel policies of political integration. Its pursuit of erudition is unprecedented in West Africa's history, underscoring much that is distinctive about the realm." (Gomez, 2018, p. 5)

But Prof Gomez insists :

"What therefore unites world and imperial histories is their consistent omission, their collective silence on early and medieval Africa..... West Africa is certainly left out of the narrative of early human endeavour, and only ends to be mentioned, with brevity, in conjunction with European imperialism." (Gomez, 2018, p. 12)

and yet the extent of the imperial area was massive.

"From the late first millennium BCE into the beginning of the second millennium CE, a series of communities were nurtured by a flood plain that at its apex covered more than 170,000 square kilometres, comparing favourably with Mesopotamia's maximum range of cultivable land of 51,000 square kilometres, and ancient Egypt's 34,000 square kilometres. Spanning from the Iron Age (from the first millennium BCE well into the first millennium CE), the region was dotted with literally hundreds of urban sites characterised by a variety of crafts and productive capacities.." (Gomez, 2018, p. 13)

As stated earlier the omission of Africa from world history was no accident but a deliberate ploy by western academics following Kant's proposal that Africans should be written out of history via the claim that they had no historical personality. Appiah's work to the extent that he has

deliberately ignored written sources and deliberately supported Kantian views about the place of Africa in history constitutes a support for and endorsement of genocide. As a scholar attending major universities access to all published sources must be assumed.

But Appiah's position is not merely to support the suppression of history but also to specifically argue for the absence of an African culture or identity. The connection with genocide is straightforward. If there was no culture in Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans they, Europeans, could not have caused any harm. They could not have done any damage that required repair and healing.

Appiah argues incredulously that the multiplicity of nations in Africa is proof that Africans have nothing in common, no shared identity:

'It seems to me, as I have said, that Judaism - the religion - and the wider body of Jewish practice through which the various communities of the Diaspora have defined themselves allow for a cultural conception of Jewish identity that cannot be made plausible in the case of Pan-Africanism. As evidence of this fact, I would simply cite the way that the fifty or so rather disparate African nationalities in our present world seem to have met the nationalist impulses of many Africans, while Zionism has, of necessity, been satisfied by the creation of a single state.'

(K. A. Appiah, 1992, p. 43)

But Africa is a continent not an island! Further the dream of the early Pan Africanists was continental unity which is still a major driver of the organisation known as the African Union. In any case the Zionist were offered Uganda and they only said they wanted Israel *first*.

Appiah's argument from multiplicity is a strange one lacking in basic credibility. First, as a student of Wittgensteinian Cambridge he was fully aware of the counter argument from Wittgenstein that a group could be legitimately put together by family resemblances rather than having one sole item in common. A looks like B who looks like C who looks like D making a family of A,B, C and D. Rather than utilising this argument Appiah challenges his reader to find one thing in common between multiplicity of African identities. Secondly the 'one thing in common' approach would most likely demolish European or British identity as well, particularly if that item must not be shared with non-Europeans or non-British.

If we refer to Lemkins definition of genocide it includes seeking to destroy a group's identity and we can see above that Appiah is specifically supporting that activity in seeking to deny Africans their own identity.

Appiah writes about claims of continuity between ancient and modern cultures - 'And I deny that this condition is satisfied in the relationship between ancient Egypt and modern Africa, or ancient Greece and modern Europe' (K. A. Appiah, 1992, p. 102) This is a very strange statement. It is a central part of modern Western philosophy's self understanding, following Kant, that it has a close foundational relationship with ancient Greece. This may or may not be true and Park has written extensively about it (Park, 2013). What is not credible is for one scholar merely to declare, ex cathedra, his disapproval. It invites the comment: who are you? One

interpretation is that since Appiah's target is Africa he is indifferent to the fact that his comments will be ignored in Europe and only wishes to protect himself from claims of inconsistency..

It has to be admitted that Appiah's blinkers apply further than Africa even if Africa appears to be his prime target. Appiah consistently denudes all other non white cultures of historical personality. In his opening words of 'Color Conscious' he implies that the Chinese never had an idea of the Han people or of Asian-ness until Europeans gave it to them. He imagines a Chinese immigrant at immigration control being asked what 'race' they were. Appiah implies they would not understand but this is implausible. He writes: 'Seventy years ago, how would you have explained to someone from outside the modern West what our English word "race" meant?' (A. Appiah & Gutman, 1996, p. 31) Either they can speak English or they cannot. To speak English is to be familiar with most popular words and 'race' would be a popular word. If she could not speak English then the question would be translated into the nearest Chinese equivalent of ethnicities and there are many!!! For example: *Gweilo*.

Given there had been many contacts between Europeans and Chinese they would inevitably be able to describe each other:

'Given textual and archaeological evidence, it is thought that thousands of [Europeans](#) lived in [Imperial China](#) during the period of [Mongol](#) rule.^[1] These were people from countries traditionally belonging to the lands of [Christendom](#) during the [High](#) to [Late Middle Ages](#) who visited, traded, performed [Christian missionary](#) work, or lived in [China](#). This occurred primarily during the second half of the 13th century and the first half of the 14th century, coinciding with the rule of the [Mongol Empire](#), which ruled over a large part of [Eurasia](#) and connected Europe with their Chinese dominion of the [Yuan dynasty](#) (1271–1368).^[2] Whereas the [Byzantine Empire](#) centered in [Greece](#) and [Anatolia](#) maintained rare incidences of correspondence with the [Tang](#), [Song](#) and [Ming](#) dynasties of China, [the Roman papacy](#) sent several missionaries and embassies to the early Mongol Empire as well as to [Khanbaliq](#) (modern [Beijing](#)), the capital of the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty. These contacts with the West were only preceded by rare interactions between the [Han-period](#) Chinese and [Hellenistic Greeks](#) and [Romans](#).' ("Europeans in Medieval China," 2019)

Appiah's comments implies that the Chinese lady had no idea of the difference between European and Han or Asian people. This beggars the imagination. ("Europeans in Medieval China," 2019)

We hope to have shown that Appiah has deliberately ignored whole passages of African history in order to support a Kantian genocidal view that Africans have no historical personality and so no real history before the arrival of Europeans; that he has sought to support denials of African identity by specifically denying the existence of any such identity either for African Americans or even Africans. If Africans had no identity they cannot have suffered genocide by having their identity stolen from them when enslaved and transported to Africa. There will be nothing to repair (reparations) and no requirement for healing. To this extent Appiah has been a supporter of the Western genocidal programs of Kant.

However this kind of scholarship has consequences. It leads to a world not merely of sotto voce denial but sometimes open enthusiastic endorsement of genocide. Listen to Christopher Hitchens:

Referring to Genocide, Hitchens wrote “such violence is worth glorifying since it more often than not has been for the long-term betterment of mankind - as in the United States today, where the extermination of [American Indians] has brought about “a nearly boundless epoch of opportunity and innovation” ‘.(Stannard, 2009)

Robert Jay Lifton et al have spelt out some of the responsibilities that academics share in concealing, encouraging and endorsing genocide. They shall have the last word:

“We should not be surprised by instances of what many would consider to be inappropriate use of academic credentials and skills, since, after all, academics and professionals have contributed in direct ways to genocidal killing projects, including the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. They have done so by lending their talents and prestige to racist, victimizing ideologies that are central features of many genocides, by helping to create and administer the policies and technologies of mass killing and by actually engaging in the killing.[30] If highly educated academics and professionals have been able to repudiate their ethical codes and serve as accomplices and perpetrators of actual genocides, it is likely that they would be even more able to engage in an activity in which no one is killed. It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the serious harm caused by denial of genocide, particularly denial wrapped in the guise of legitimate scholarship. In this section, we examine the harm done by pseudoscholarly denial of known genocides and consider the assertion, put forth by some scholars, that deliberate denial is a form of aggression that ought to be regarded as a contribution to genocidal violence in its own Right.”

Lifton et al then turn to examining the possible motives of such scholars.

““Intellectuals who engage in the denial of genocide may be motivated in part by either type of careerism, or by both. The more insidious form, however, is the second type of careerism. Here material rewards are important, but more so, the opportunity for certain psychological and social satisfactions: a sense of importance, of status, of being in control, all of which can come through identification with power, something we believe we have shown in the memorandum we have analyzed. The price for intellect in the service of denial, however, is a particular conception of knowledge, one in which knowledge not only serves the ends of those in power, but is *defined by power*. But to define truth in terms of power is to reveal the bankruptcy, irrationality, and above all, danger, of the whole enterprise of denial of genocide. Inherent in such a view of knowledge is both a deep-seated nihilism and an urge to tyranny.”

“Those of us who wish to be true to our scholarly calling have a clear obligation here. We must first expose this form of denial. At the same time we must ourselves bear witness to historical truths—to the full narrative of mass murder and human suffering. To be witnessing professionals in this way requires that we take in grim details so that we can tell the story with accuracy and insight. It is a task to which we must bring both heart and

mind, an approach that combines advocacy and detachment. We require sufficient detachment to maintain rigorous intellectual standards in evaluating evidence and drawing conclusions. At the same time our moral advocacy should require us to open ourselves to suffering as a way of taking a stand against cruelty and killing, whatever its source.” (Markusen, Smith, & Lifton, 1995)

Notes

1. “At common law, libel was recognized as a criminal misdemeanor as well as an individual injury justifying damages (a tort). Prosecutions of the offense had three goals: protection of government from seditious statements capable of weakening popular support and causing insurrection; reinforcement of public morals by requiring a "decent" mode of community discourse; and protection of the individual from writings likely to hold him up to hatred, contempt, or ridicule. The protection of the individual, a goal that is generally left to tort law, was justified by the criminal law's responsibility for outlawing statements likely to provoke breaches of peace.’
(“Criminal Libel - The History Of Criminal Libel, Development Of The Law In The United States, The Constitutional Protection Of Freedom Of Expression,” n.d.)

REFERENCES

- Appiah, A., & Gutman, A. (1996). *Color Conscious by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Amy Gutmann, and David B. Wilkins - Read Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/book/233092886/Color-Conscious-The-Political-Morality-of-Race>
- Appiah, K. A. (1992). *In My Father's House*. New York: OUP.
- Criminal Libel - The History Of Criminal Libel, Development Of The Law In The United States, The Constitutional Protection Of Freedom Of Expression. (n.d.). Retrieved July 14, 2019, from <https://law.jrank.org/pages/1563/Libel-Criminal.html>
- Europeans in Medieval China. (2019). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Europeans_in_Medieval_China&oldid=902978124
- Gomez, M. A. (2018). *African Dominion: A New history of Empire in early and medieval West Africa*. Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Ladimeji, D. (2019). Charles Mills and Kant -part 2. *African Century Journal*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/39539244/Charles_Mills_and_Kant_-part_2
- Markusen, E., Smith, R. W., & Lifton, R. J. (1995). Professional Ethics and the Denial of Armenian Genocide. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, (Spring). Retrieved from <https://pen.org/professional-ethics-and-the-denial-of-armenian-genocide/>
- Park, P. K. J. (2013). *Africa, Asia and the History of Philosophy: racism in the formation of the philosophical canon 1780-1830*. USA: SUNY.
- Power, S. (2005). Introduction to the First Edition by Lawbook Exchange Ltd. In *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (2nd ed.). New Jersey, USA: The Lawbook Exchange Ltd.
- Stannard, D. (2009). Uniqueness as denial: the politics of genocide scholarship. In *Is the holocaust unique?* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, USA: Westview Press.
- Wagner, A. J., & Fargo, A. L. (2015). Special Report: Criminal Libel in the United States | Defamation Laws. Retrieved July 13, 2019, from <http://legaldb.freemedia.at/special-report-criminal-libel-in-the-united-states/>