
DECOLONIZING ‘WHITENESS’ IN AFRICA: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WHITE IDENTITY, PRIVILEGE AND IMPERATIVE OF RACIAL JUSTICE

Uchenna Azubuike, Ezeogu, PhD.

General Studies Unit (Philosophy)

Nigeria Maritime University Okerenkoko, Warri South West Local Government Area

Delta State Nigeria. +2348037846233 ucheinchrist2000@gmail.com

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Chinweuba, Gregory Emeka, PhD

Philosophy Unit, General Studies Division,

Enugu State University of Science and Technology, (ESUT), Agbani, Enugu.

gregory.chinweuba@esut.edu.ng +234 8037949566 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7659-6974>

Abstract

The research critically examines the complex relationships between whiteness, colonialism and privileges. It challenges the dominant narratives surrounding white identity and its perpetuation of systemic inequalities. The idea of ‘whiteness’ tends to operate from a privilege position. Through decolonial theoretical framework, this study excavates the historical constructions of whiteness, tracing its evolution from colonialism and imperialism to contemporary neo-liberalism. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, this study aims to dismantle the epistemological and structural foundations of white supremacy. In conclusion the paper argues that skin pigmentation has nothing to do with a person’s or group of persons’ epistemic ability or character, yet it has influenced the social distribution of economic goods.

Keywords: Colonialism, Decoloniality, Racial Justice, Systemic Inequality, Whiteness

Introduction

It is important to note that after decades of colonialism in Africa, the continent still grapple with the effect of colonialism and practices associated with it. In modern time, coloniality has become fertile ground for the changing dynamics of neocolonialism and imperialism. Although scholarly treatises have proposed ways for African economic and political emancipation, these efforts have not yielded sufficient results. No wonder, in 2025 African Philosophy World Conference in Duouala, Cameroon, ‘decoloniality’ and ‘transcoloniality’ became prioritized topics of debate. In this paper, we argued that there is a mental dimension to colonial challenge, which has continued to constitute a major obstacle in the entire narrative.

This dimension is the identity of ‘whiteness’ that goes with privileges in the psyche of the presupposed white and perceived coloured people (especially Africans). The identity of ‘whiteness’ encourages colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism and racism. It makes white people think that they are superior to others, and make others to accept the inferior status. A large number of Africans ironically shares the later status. For before members of the white race, these Africans assume *a priori* inferiority visible in expressions; *Ndi ocha akarika anyi* (white people are superior to us), *bekee wu agbara* (white people are gods), *mbakara edi ekpo* (white people are spirits) (Oguejiofor, 2009, p.1). The dire implication is the growing population of young Africans viewing the members of the white race as standard of perfection.

It is in this direction that Fanon (1967) iterated that whiteness has even become a symbol of purity, of justice and virginity. This is as it is viewed as defining what it means to be “civilized, modern and human”; while blackness is thought to represent the diametrical opposite: “ugliness, sin, darkness and immorality” (Fanon, 1967, p.139). In his forward to the 2008 edition of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask*, Ziauddin Sardar congruently posits that even the dictionary definition of white means ‘clean and pure’. In Roget’s Thesaurus however is over 134 synonyms for whiteness that all go with positive connotations in contrary to the same Roget’s Thesaurus documenting black negatively as meaning dirty, prohibited and funeral in 120 synonyms. For Fanon (1967, p. xiii), this idea of ‘whiteness’ is why “a white lie is excusable; and black lie is all that wicked and evil” (Fanon, 1967, p. xiii).

From all indices, there is already a pre-established unequal racial relationship in our world since the colonial era; leading to superiority and inferiority complexes. While this racial order clothing the Whites with superiority complex, it relegated the blacks to inferior status. As such, the white identity became the standard, which every other race must attend, to reach the level of humanity. This psychological myth has contributed a great deal to the undoing of the black race. For with this kind of mental disposition; “the black man wants to be white, the white man slaves to reach a human level” (Sardar qt. in Fanon, 1967, p. vi). This has made it difficult to achieve total decolonization in Africa, most especially as the self-debasement propelled by the superiority attached to ‘whiteness’ impacts the self-perception of the African and hinders his authentic emancipation. It is these decades of assumed white superiority that catalyzes the sudden detest of black skin colour and increasing skin bleaching among many young Africans in order to appear white.

Consequently, western influence in all facets of African life may not end in the near future without effective decolonization of ‘whiteness’. This is identity decolonization and decolonization of being, the process of reclaiming and reconstituting African being, identity and existence. Since this decolonization of white identity will encourage racial justice, this study argues for decolonization of ‘whiteness’ on the rationale that African renaissance must authentically begin with identity decolonization. The study thus unravels the social construction of ‘whiteness’ as a tool of subjugation, white privilege as breeding ground for oppression and the hurdles faced by colored people in the cosmic racial order.

The Social Construction of White Identity

Among the fundamental questions in this treatise are; what is white identity? What is whiteness? We are not going to consider these questions in the light of the philosophical problem of universals embodied in metaphysics and epistemology. Those are classical problems concerned with the nature of universal abstraction. We are rather viewing ‘whiteness’ from the perspective of what it connotes to state that a thing or a person is white - the ontological meaning of white identity. Before we delve into ‘white’ ontology however, it is of utmost importance to consider the concept of identity. This is because a proper analysis of the concept of identity will form the basis for a better understanding of the idea of white identity in its compound nature. The concept of identity has been approached from various perspectives that now amount to numerous views. One of these interesting views was that of Omoniyi and White. This view holds that identity is a problematic and complex concept constructed by individuals of themselves (or ascribed by others), or by people who share certain core values or perceive another group as having such values. For Omoniyi and White (2006, p. 1), identity is a sociolinguistics construct that has to do with the ways in which people position or construct themselves or the way they are positioned or constructed by others in a socio-cultural situation through the instrumentality of language. The above postulation signals dual perspectives; identity as a social creation and the fact that one or group can create personal identity or give an identity to another person or group. It is on this basis that in Nigeria for instance, South Easterners refer to Northerners as ‘Aboki’ or ‘Mallam’ while the Northerners refer to South Easterners as ‘nyamiri’. These existential examples shade light on the contextual discourse on white identity as a social creation.

Moreover, Erikson (1968) talks of the individual or group sense of self. This sense includes personal or group values, beliefs and experiences that define the individual or group as unique. It is this sense of ‘self’ that makes one think that he is superior, while the other thinks he is inferior. The social concept of identity thus implies that identity has to do with individual understanding or sense of self. Identity here becomes what the individual perceives herself to be and what she perceives others to be. This implies that the battle of decolonization begins with the decolonization of the assumed individual self-identity or self-perception.

On the sociological conception of identity still; Giddens (1991) portrays identity as a socially constructed concept shaped by cultural norms, roles and expectations that define an individual’s place in society. What this conception is trying to state is that identity goes with roles, and these roles are rooted in cultural norms. For example, if one assumes the identity of a father, such a person must take up the social roles associated with fatherhood. In other words, a person’s social role determines the person’s social identity. On the cultural conception of identity, identity is a shared sense of belonging to a group, based on common history, language, customs and values.

On the concept of whiteness, just like every other social science or philosophical concepts, it has no univocal definition. The problem is partially because of diversity in the usage

of the term. Difficulty in arriving at a common definition however does not imply that the term ‘whiteness’ has no definition. For Clarke and Garner (2010, p.10), whiteness is about power and privilege. They argue that no matter how low white people are in a given society, white people benefit from being white. Though Clarke and Garner (2010, p. 18) posited that the benefit white people gain by being white are not necessarily intentional, “whiteness denotes a position of privilege”. It is then decipherable that ‘white privilege’ existing as an unwritten social norm allows white people to be treated differently and in a favourable way when compared with people of other races. This view is corroborated by Mills (2004, pp. 44-45), who posits that “the systemic aspect of whiteness suggests that it benefits people regardless of whether they want to benefit or not”. This position appears faulty, for in the first instance; if whiteness is a social construct with privileges, who constructed it? Either white people or people of other race constructed it. Is it then possible for people of other race to construct whiteness with its privileges and deny themselves equal privileges? At this point, we are left with the lone option that the idea of whiteness as a social construct was designed by white people as a means to gain advantage over people of other races. If this is logically presumed to be so, it suffices to say that it will amount to error in reasoning for one to append ‘regardless of whether they want to benefit or not’ or argue that the benefits accrued to ‘whiteness’ are not necessarily intentional. This is because ontologically, ‘whiteness’ was created to serve such benefits. The idea of ‘whiteness is therefore a deliberate design with benefits, hence the idea of ‘regardless’ becomes unnecessary.

Analyzing the Role of Privilege in Systems of Oppression

This treatise agrees that unequal distribution of privileges in a social system is the breeding ground for oppression and social injustice. Oppression and social injustice can be physical in the sense of spatial or mental in the form of non-spatial. On the mental dimension, we can talk of epistemic injustice, scientific dependence and the likes occasioned by the whites. In this direction, the whites accord themselves more privilege while subjugating Africans to epistemic injustice and scientific dependence. This is glaring in the

western sponsored research institutions and agencies that over the years usurp the power of recognizing African intellectual output and research process based on whether the tune is called from or funded from the Global North. So far, the African academics’ research emerged from any of the known research institutions or agencies in the West where scientific outputs and clinical trials are monolithically taken to be certain and true, accepted as impactful. Contrarily, such research is rejected. (Chinweuba, Arum & Udabah, 2025, p. 78).

On the physical aspect, we experience these challenges in the areas of economic distribution and migration. The Western geopolitical bloc usurps economic privileges at the international level using United Nations (UN) organs like World Trade Organization (WTO) and International

Monetary Fund (IMF) to achieve economic privileges. Global economic distribution thus wears the face of postmodernism where justice, fairness and privileges are in the interest of the whites. This presents philosophy of postmodernism in global economic distribution as subscribing more to the precedence of the authority and interest of the whites in especially the Global North. With this philosophy, the principle of equality and social justice are taken for granted, hence weak and developing continents like Africa is allowed little or no say in the global economic distribution, decision making and policies. Rather, via geopolitics, the Global North that is largely white influence economic privileges in the critical sectors of the black nations to their advantage.

On the other hand, it is far easier for white persons to travel without restriction to anywhere of choice in the world where blacks face lots of obstacles and restrictions. Particularly, it is easier for a white person to come into Africa than an African moving to Western countries. This privilege further unfolds in a white person working in Africa being considered as an expatriate, while an African in Europe or America is regarded as immigrant. The white privilege is broader in Africa where the whites enjoy nonreciprocal hospitality because they are whites. Emanating from the reason of Africa's 'mental enslavement', Africans even accord more respect to Western culture than African culture. Thus, the African that speaks a Western language fluently like the Westerners is celebrated as cerebral. Many Africans now speak, dress, eat, and virtually do everything like the Westerners in order to be part of the trend. The more negative aspect is that many Africans consider those who cannot flow in this trend primitive. By so doing, these Africans corroborate the views of Western scholars like; Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Edward Taylor, James Frazer and the likes who argued that Africans are primitive.

Through the media, we have seen instances where over some misconceptions and grudges against all foreigners, host Africans maimed and killed other Africans while selectively avoided the white people. A more practical example is the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. Xenophobia has to do with dislike of people from other countries and cultures. The argument here is not to promote or encourage xenophobia, it is rather to buttress how through mental colonization, the Western world has ended up placing itself in a position of superiority and Africa has largely accepted such condition as normal. This is what Ezeogu (2022, p.43) tagged "image propaganda"; a situation where the Western world has succeeded in presenting itself as the modern ideal for almost everything, while Africa is projected as the exact opposite. The accruing self-defeatist position subsisting in Africa's continued acceptance of this situation has become part of the basis of Western total dominance in the global space.

Based on privilege therefore, the white is considered and esteemed very high, while being black is the opposite; both to the Westerners and Africans. Even in the areas of linguistics and interpretation, whiteness has continued to go with a lot of privilege. For instance, when one says 'white witch' it goes with positive connotation insinuating scientific and technological advancement while the idea of 'black witch' is associated with everything evil. The same goes with the expressions; 'white magic' and 'black magic', 'white lies' and 'black lies'. These conceptions were carefully crafted to ensure the superiority of the white race over every other

race. The more downside of this white privilege is not only its hindrance of the decolonization goal because of its larger African acceptance, but being the basis for the glaring social and racial injustice against Africans.

Decolonizing Whiteness as a Strategy for a just future

We have been able to establish that problem exists with the way white identity is socially constructed. We aver that it is in the interest of the white people that their identity is so constructed. This implies that genuine effort at deconstructing white acclaimed superior identity cannot logically come from white people. It is then the responsibility of those at the disadvantaged end in this social identity construction to resist white superiority, such as it is the onus of Karl Marx's proletariats to resist the bourgeois capitalist economy. Decolonizing whiteness has to do with demystifying and deconstructing white identity vis-a-vis other racial identity in order to create a level playing ground for all to thrive. McIntosh's article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* gives insight to the contextual argument. She drew a parallel between white privilege and male privilege. Thus, just as white people enjoy certain privileges for being white, there are also privileges enjoyed by men just because they are men. Worth highlighting in McIntosh thought is that though men (possibly some or most) are aware of women's disadvantaged position within the society and are willing for an equal playing field for all, they are not willing to give up their own privileges that are invariably responsible for the disparity and social injustice. We can infer by the same argument that white people (at least some) are aware of certain privileges they enjoy just because they are white, yet they are not willing to let go of these privileges. This is evident when we consider the number of white people or possibly Western scholars of white descent who engage themselves in African studies and the problems of social, racial and epistemic injustice. Though they are aware of these injustices and still argue against them, not many have rejected the privileges that accrue from this social imbalance to them for being white. We have scholars like Theodore W. Allen: author of *The Invention of the White Race* (1994, 1997), a seminal work on the origins of white supremacy; David Roediger *The wages of Whiteness: Race and the making of American Working Class* (1991); Robin DiAngelo *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018) and so on. Their writings and that of others on white privileges have not changed the narrative. Although these works are commendable for raising awareness, awareness alone cannot address the problem. In most cases, these privileges are given to the whites by colored people (especially blacks), a gesture that makes it near impossible to establish an equal social balance.

Indeed, Garrett Hardin's "lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor", gives us insight into Western (white people) understanding of others (colored people) and how people of other races are treated by the Western world. Hardin uses a lifeboat metaphor to illustrate the ethics of resource distribution. He describes a lifeboat with 50 people, having room for 10 more, surrounded by 100 swimmers in the ocean. The question revolves on; who should be allowed on

the lifeboat and who should be left to drown? Beyond Hardin's ethics of resource distribution, there is ethics of self-interest. For those 50 persons who are on the lifeboat, they are not interested in adjusting their comfort to accommodate others; western immigration policies serve as a good example in this context. It is always in the interest of the white population. The CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera networks were aflame with the news of this interest displayed by the US President Donald Trump to the so-called white South African refugees in May 2025. This signals that white people can actually enter any country of their choice in the world, while colored people (especially Africans) are largely restricted in their movement.

Conclusion

Our effort has been to establish the paradox between racial justice and white identity. We cannot talk of racial justice without addressing the challenge posed by white identity. This is because the conception of white identity diminishes every possibility of racial justice. Our argument includes that it is logically improper to talk of racial justice without addressing the unequal racial relationship orchestrated by privileged white identity. Privileges associated with white identity are integral part of global social structure. The mere fact that one is white has already placed such a person at an advantaged position over people of other races. In the early 90s, possibly between 1991 and 1993, we had an experience that is still with us. It was recently that we started thinking differently about the experience. One of our friends was sick, and his father took him to a hospital managed by a white medical doctor. We can remember vividly how relieved we felt because a white medical doctor was handling our friend, and the patient's sense of pride that he is getting the best medical services. Pondering this experience, we now recall there was no questioning on whether the white medical Doctor was actually qualified, no question about his efficiency, the simple logical sequence then was that, so far he was a white man, he must be the best. This kind of mentality (whiteness) has developed in the psyche of many Africans over the years. Such colonized mentality affirms Franz Fanon's position on the unequal treatment of white and black people.

Beyond the fact that this challenge exists, our major concern includes how the action and inaction of colored people has helped in exacerbating the problem of 'whiteness'. Thus, the acceptance of the superiority of the white by people of other race has helped to fan the ember of 'whiteness'; such disposition from non-whites has continued to increase social disparity between white people and others. The connection created by these scenarios is just like in Hegelian dialectics, where the appearance of the antitheses before a thesis is what will lead to a synthesis. The 'thesis' so long as it remains alone will remain the way it is. One can say that; it is in the interest of the theses that the *status quo* remains the way it is. In the same manner, it is in the interest of the white that we maintain a high regard for white identity. The negative social disparity created by this kind of arrangement does not affect them (white people), hence it cannot truly be an issue of concern to them. We strongly reiterate again that responsibility lies on those negatively affected by social disparity to question, challenge and change the *status quo*. This

aligns with Marxist view that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Authentic decolonization of ‘whiteness’ therefore begins with identity decolonization. Until white identity is decolonized, every perceived success in decolonization process will only be linguistic rhetoric.

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