Staying Power

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The History of Black People in Britain

Peter Fryer

Foreword by Gary Younge

Introduction by Paul Gilroy

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1. 'Those kinde of people'

Africans in Britannia

There were Africans in Britain before the English came here. They were soldiers in the Roman imperial army that occupied the southern part of our island for three and a half centuries. Among the troops defending Hadrian's wall in the third century AD was a 'division of Moors' (*numerus Maurorum Aurelianorum*) named after Marcus Aurelius or a later emperor known officially by the same name. Originally raised in north Africa, this unit was stationed at Aballava, now Burgh by Sands, near Carlisle. It was listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, an official register of the Roman administrative system,[1] and there is an inscription referring to it on a third-century altar found in 1934 built facing down into a cottage wall at Beaumont, not far from Burgh.[2]

Though the earliest attested date for this unit's presence here is 253–8, an African soldier is reputed to have reached Britain by about the year 210. 'Of great fame among clowns and good for a laugh any time' (*clarae inter scurras famae et celebratorum semper iocorum*), this 'Ethiopian' has gone down in history as a man daring enough to mock the emperor who, in all probability, had brought him to Britain. It happened near Carlisle. Septimius Severus, the Libya-born emperor who spent his last three years in what was then a remote province, had been inspecting Hadrian's wall. He had just defeated the wild Caledonians who lived on the other side and, being very superstitious, was hoping for a good omen. He was far from pleased to encounter a black soldier flourishing a garland of cypress boughs. Sacred to the underworld god Pluto, the cypress could mean only one thing to a Roman: death. Severus was troubled, not only by the ominous nature of the garland, but also by the soldier's 'ominous' colour. 'Get out of my sight!' he shouted. The soldier replied sardonically: 'You have been all things, you have conquered all things, now, O conqueror, be a god!' Matters were hardly improved when, wishing to make a propitiatory sacrifice, Severus was provided with victims which also happened to be black. Abandoning the sacrifice in disgust at this further bad omen, he found that his

attendants had carelessly brought these animals to the very door of the palace.[3] It was a black day, as we say, for the emperor – we share some puns with the Romans, and some superstitions – and he died not long afterwards, at York.

Besides African soldiers and slaves, there may well have been officers *(praefecti)* from the flourishing towns of north Africa serving in Roman Britain in the second and third centuries.[4] And, though no remains have yet been positively identified, there can be little doubt that Africans were buried here. Among 350 human skeletons found in an excavation at York in 1951–9 – the greatest number yet exhumed in any Romano-British cemetery – were several of men whose limb proportions suggest that they were black Africans.[5]

Africans in Scotland

There are traces of an African presence in the British Isles some 400 or 500 years after the Romans left. An ancient Irish chronicle records that 'blue men' *(fir gorma)* were seized by Vikings in Morocco in the ninth century and carried off to Ireland, where they stayed for a long time.[1] And the remains of a young African girl were recently found in a burial, dated *c.* 1000, at North Elmham in Norfolk, about 25 miles north-west of Norwich.[2] Then the records are silent until the early sixteenth century, when a small group of Africans was attached to the court of King James IV of Scotland, experiencing in the royal service what has been called a 'benevolent form' of the black slavery that had become common and fashionable in southern Europe during the preceding 200 years.[3] These Africans were probably taken from Portuguese slavers by the Barton brothers, Scottish privateers whose father's ship, loaded with rich merchandise, had been seized by a Portuguese squadron and who had been authorized by James IV to seize Portuguese ships until the equivalent of 12,000 ducats was recovered.[4]

One of the Africans in Edinburgh was a drummer ('taubronar') and choreographer. For the Shrove Tuesday festivities in 1505 he devised a dance with 12 performers in chequered black-and-white costumes, specially made at a cost of £13 2*s*. 10*d*. The king loved music, himself played both lute and clavichord, and was generous to other musicians; and he seems to have liked the drummer. He bought him a horse costing £4 4s. and took him at least once, with four Italian minstrels and three falconers, on the annual royal pilgrimage to the shrine of St Duthac in Tain.[5] He bought him clothes

(a yellow coat, for instance), spent 28*s*. on having his drum painted ('to pay for paynting of his taubron'), paid his doctor's bills, and gave money to his wife and child – perhaps the same 'Moris barne' whom the king asked specially to see, tipping the nurse 28s. for bringing the baby to him.[6]

There were several young women ('More lasses') among the Africans in Edinburgh. On 11 December 1504, one of them was baptized – 'the More las wes cristinit', says the account.[7] A few years later one of these women had a poem written about her by the great Scottish poet William Dunbar, according to whom she had recently disembarked ('landet furth of the last schippis'). Dunbar describes her participation in the tournament of the black knight and the black lady, one of the spectacular shows that James IV loved as much as he loved music. The king himself played the part of the black knight – some sources say 'wild knight' – who championed the black lady in the lists, and the event was so successful in 1507 that it was repeated, more elaborately still, in the following year. The poet says the black lady had full lips and a snub nose, and skin that shone like soap; in her rich costume she gleamed as bright as a barrel of tar; when she was born the sun had to tolerate eclipse.[8] Her tournament gown alone cost £29, a tidy sum in those days. It was made of damask flowered with gold, trimmed with green and yellow taffeta; her gauze-covered sleeves and her gloves were of soft black leather and about her arm she had a gauze kerchief. Her two female attendants wore gowns of green Flemish taffeta trimmed with yellow and her two squires were dressed in white damask. She was carried in a 'chair triumphale' covered with white, yellow, purple, green, and grey Flemish taffeta – altogether £88 was spent on this stuff, which in those days was always pure silk.[9] One of her tasks was to guard the Tree of Esperance, a great artificial tree of chivalry on which the shields of challenge were hung.[10] As black knight the king beat all challengers, whether with spear, sword, or mace[11] – which was just as well since, if Dunbar's ribald poem is to be believed, the winner was rewarded by the black lady's kiss and close embrace, while losers had to 'cum behind and kis her hippis'.[12] After the 40-day tournament there were three days of feasting, culminating in a display by a conjuror who caused a cloud to descend from the roof of the Holyroodhouse banqueting hall and, as it seemed, snatch up the black lady so that she was seen no more.[13]

In 1513 there were still at least 'twa blak ladeis' at the Scottish court, and the king spent £7 on ten French crowns as a new

year gift for them.[14] Clothing and shoes were bought for 'Elen More', otherwise referred to as 'Blak Elene', and she was given five French crowns in 1512, while a gown for 'blak Margaret' in the following year cost 48*s*.[15] The Scottish queen's attendants included a 'blak madin', who was given four and a quarter ells (just under five yards) of French russet, at a cost of £3 16*s*. 6 *d*.[16] In the same period the bishop of Murray too had a black servant ('the Bischop of Murrais more'), who earned himself a tip of 14*s*. when he carried a present to the king.[17] In 1527 'Helenor, the blak moir' was paid 40*s*., [18] and in 1567 and 1569 'Nageir the More' had clothing bought for him.[19]

A generation later there was still at least one African living in Edinburgh. By standing in for a lion as a pageant performer in 1594 he helped celebrate the birth of Henry Frederick, eldest son of James VI of Scotland (soon to be England's James I). It had been planned to use a lion to pull a chariot, 12 feet long and 7 feet across, bearing a 'sumpteous couered Table, decked with all sortes of exquisite delicates and dainties, of pattisserie, frutages [i.e. decorative arrangements of fruit], and confections'. But at the last minute it was feared that the lion might frighten the spectators or worse, especially if startled by the torches. So 'a Black-Moore', 'very richly attyred', pretended to haul on 'great chaines of pure gold' attached to a chariot in fact propelled by 'a secreet convoy'. Grouped around the sumptuously decked table were 'six Gallant dames', representing Ceres, goddess of agriculture, Fecundity, Faith, Concord, Liberality, and Perseverance.[20] Nothing whatever is known about the black man who 'pulled' the chariot, not even his name, but he could well have been a descendant of the group that had arrived in Scotland some 90 years earlier.

Africans in England

Around the same time as that group of Africans reached Edinburgh, a solitary black musician was living in London, employed by Henry VII and his successor, Henry VIII. Whether he came straight from Africa or from Scotland – or, indeed, as is quite possible, from Spain or Portugal – is not recorded. Nor do we know his real name. The accounts of the treasurer of the Chamber, who paid the king's musicians their wages, refer to him as John Blanke – but this, since it means 'John White', was surely an 'ironic jest'.[1] We know however that he played the trumpet, that Henry VII paid him 8*d*. a day, and

that he had to wait a week for the 20*s*. due to him for the month of November 1507.[2] This 'blacke trumpet', as the accounts call him, is pretty certainly the man who is twice portrayed in the painted roll of the 1511 Westminster Tournament, held to celebrate the birth of a son to Catherine of Arragon. The most precious treasure of the College of Arms, the roll shows a black trumpeter mounted on a grey horse with black harness; his five white companions are also on horseback. All six wear yellow halved with grey and have blue purses at their waists. The white trumpeters are bare-headed, but the black trumpeter is wearing a brown turban latticed with yellow. The double-curve fanfare trumpets are decorated with the royal quarterings, fringed white and green.[3]

Forty years later, the first group of black Africans came to England. It was the summer of 1555 – before we had potatoes, or tobacco, or tea, and nine years before Shakespeare was born. Queen Mary was on the throne, had recently married Philip of Spain, and was much occupied with having heretics burnt. Some of her subjects were more interested in getting rich than in arguing about religion, and it was the pursuit of riches that caused them to bring here a group of five Africans. The visitors came from the small town of Shama, which can be found in any large atlas, on the coast of what nowadays we call Ghana. Three of them were known as Binne, Anthonie, and George; the names, real or adopted, of the other two have not come down to us. A contemporary account speaks of 'taule and stronge men' who 'coulde well agree with owr meates and drynkes' although 'the coulde and moyst ayer dooth sumwhat offende them' (tall and strong men [who] could well agree with our kind of food and drink [although] the cold and damp air gives them some trouble).[4]

The same account refers to these five Africans as slaves. Whatever their status, they had been borrowed, not bought. Englishmen were not to start trafficking in slaves for another eight years. For the time being, English merchants were simply after a share in the profits to be gained from African gold, ivory, and pepper. The Portuguese had been hogging this lucrative West African trade for more than 100 years and had long managed to keep their rich pickings secret from their European neighbours. Now the secret was out. Portugal had ardent competitors to face. But the English needed African help if they were to succeed in breaking the Portuguese monopoly. That was why John Lok, son of a prominent London merchant and alderman, brought the group of West Africans over here in 1555. The idea was

that they should learn English and then go back to Africa as interpreters and, as it were, public relations men.[5]

In fact, three of them were taken home after a few months by another London merchant, William Towerson, whom they were soon helping by persuading fellow-Africans that it was safe to venture on board the *Hart* and the *Tiger* for trading purposes: the going rate for three ounces of gold was 39 brass or copper basins and two small white saucers. An eyewitness account tells how the three returning travellers were welcomed by their countrymen. At Hanta, not far from Shama, 'our Negroes were well knowen, and the men of the towne wept for joy, when they saw them'. And at Shama itself one of them was greeted by an aunt, another by a sister-in-law, and these ladies 'receiued them with much ioy, and so did all the rest of the people, as if they had bene their naturall brethren' (received them with much joy, and so did all the rest of the people, as if they had been their blood relatives).[6]

If we can detect a note of surprise here at Africans' behaving with such human warmth, that is because sixteenth-century English people were poorly informed about Africa and those who lived there. Of course, as more and more Englishmen went to Africa, were surprised and impressed by the riches and living standards of the rulers and merchants they met, and started publishing their findings in travel books, sober facts began to get mixed with the accepted myths. When Vice-Admiral Thomas Wyndham reached Benin in 1553 he found the king (*oba*) able to speak good Portuguese, which he had learnt as a child, and perfectly willing to let the Englishmen have 80 tons of pepper on credit until their next voyage.[7] Yet the same books that contained matter-of-fact reports providing accurate details of the Africans' houses, manners, dress, crops, and crafts – of their civilization, in short – gave equal weight to the fabulous Prester John, King of Ethiopia, who had attained the age of 562 back in the twelfth century. And these books reprinted, virtually unchanged, the ancient folklore of the elder Pliny (AD 23–79), a popular English version of whose description of Africa and Africans was published in 1566, entitled *A Summarie of the Antiquities, and wonders of the Worlde*.

What kind of light did this throw on the 'dark' continent? Readers were told that some Ethiopians had no noses, others no upper lips or tongues, others again no mouths. The Syrbotae were eight feet tall. The Ptoemphani were ruled by a dog. The Arimaspi had a single eye, in the forehead. The Agriophagi lived on the flesh

of panthers and lions, the Anthropophagi on human flesh. There were people in Libya who had no names, nor did they ever dream. The Garamantes made no marriages; the men held the women in common. The Gamphasantes went all naked. The Cynamolgi ('dog-milkers') had heads like dogs' heads. The Blemmyes had no heads at all, but eyes and mouths in their breasts.[8] 'The laste of all the Affriens Southewarde', according to another book of the time, were the Ichthyophagi, or fish-eaters. 'Like vnto beastes', after a meal of fish washed up on the shore and baked by the sun, they would 'falle vpon their women, euen as they come to hande withoute any choyse; vtterly voide of care, by reason they are alwaye sure of meate in good plentye' (like animals . . . [they would] fall upon their women, just as they come to hand, without any choice; utterly free from care because they are always sure of plenty of food).[9]

Such fantasies tended to cement in the minds of English people the notion that Africans were inherently carefree, lazy, and lustful. By the middle of the sixteenth century this notion was taken for granted,[10] just as some English people took it for granted that every male African had an enormous penis; the tiny naked figures of Africans on more than one fifteenth-century map attest to the antiquity of that belief.[11]

We can be sure that the five Africans who visited England in 1555 were stared at very hard indeed by the local inhabitants, as was the elephant's head brought over on the same voyage – along with about 250 tusks, 36 casks of malaguetta pepper, and over 4001b of 22 carat gold[12] – and put on display in the house of Sir Andrew Judd, a prosperous London merchant and alderman. The English were prepared to swallow all kinds of yarns about elephants, too – for instance, that they were continually at war with dragons, 'which desyre theyr bludde bycause it is very coulde' (which desire their blood because it is very cold).[13] Having live Africans in their midst, and finding them human enough to tolerate English food and drink while complaining of the weather, must have taught their hosts more about Africa than staring at a dead elephant's head. From that time on, those mythical carefree, lazy, lustful cannibals were always, so to say, beyond the next river or the next mountain range.

So, although knowledge about African peoples and cultures was increasing, the pale-skinned islanders disposed to make ethnocentric generalizations about dark-skinned people from over the sea found the persistent folk myths a convenient quarry. Such myths eased English consciences about enslaving Africans and thereby

encouraged the slave trade. To justify this trade, and the use of slaves to make sugar, the myths were woven into a more or less coherent racist ideology. Africans were said to be inherently inferior, mentally, morally, culturally, and spiritually, to Europeans. They were sub-human savages, not civilized human beings like us. So there could be no disgrace in buying or kidnapping them, branding them, shipping them to the New World, selling them, forcing them to work under the whip. English racism was born of greed. (The rise of racism as an ideology is discussed in chapter 7.)

The first Englishman to line his pockets by trafficking in black slaves was an unscrupulous adventurer called John Hawkyns. On that first English triangular voyage, in 1562–3, he acquired at least 300 inhabitants of the Guinea coast. Some he bought from African merchants whose wares included domestic slaves; some he hijacked from Portuguese slavers; some he simply seized. He took these people to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), where he sold them to the Spaniards for £10,000 worth of pearls, hides, sugar, and ginger. His profit on the venture was about 12 per cent.[14] Queen Elizabeth I is said, on rather slender authority, to have warned him that carrying off Africans without their consent would be 'detestable, and would call down the Vengeance of Heaven upon the Undertakers'.[15] However that may be, she was quite happy to lend Hawkyns, for his second slave-hunting voyage (1564–5), the *Jesus of Lubeck*, a 600-ton vessel with a complement of 300 men that had been bought for the English navy and was valued at £4,000.[16] And Clarenceux King-of-Arms lost no time in augmenting Hawkyns's coat of arms with a crest showing 'a demi-Moor proper [i.e. a half-length figure in natural colouring] bound captive, with annulets on his arms and in his ears'.[17] Three black men shackled with slave-collars were displayed on the coat of arms itself – a singular honour for the city of Plymouth, whose freeman Hawkyns was, and for the English navy, whose treasurer and comptroller he was soon to become.

Though it would be another 100 years before English merchants were trafficking in slaves in a really organized way, and longer still before they succeeded in dominating the slave trade, they had started dabbling. And, as a by-product of this dabbling, African slaves were brought to England from the 1570s onwards. In the late sixteenth century they were used here in three capacities: as household servants (the majority); as prostitutes or sexual conveniences for well-to-do Englishmen and Dutchmen; and as court entertainers. There is no evidence of black people being bought and sold in this country

until 1621, [18] which is not to say that it did not happen before that year. But there is clear evidence that black people were living here – and not only in London – in the last 30 years of the sixteenth century. In 1570 one Nicholas Wichehalse of Barnstaple in Devon mentioned 'Anthonye my negarre' in his will.[19] The illegitimate daughter of Mary, described as 'a *negro of* John Whites', was baptized in Plymouth in 1594; the supposed father was a Dutchman.[20] An assessment of 'Strangers' in Barking (All Hallows parish, Tower ward) about the year 1598 shows two 'Negras' – Clare, at Widow Stokes's, and Maria, at Olyver Skynnar's – and two 'Negroes', one called perhaps Jesse or Lewse (the manuscript is hard to decipher) at Mr Miton's, the other called Marea at Mr Wood's. In the following year Clare is still at Widow Stokes's and 'Mary a Negra' is at Richard Wood's, while there is an unnamed 'blackemore, seruant to Jeronimo Lopez' also resident in the parish.[21]

Towards the end of the sixteenth century it was beginning to be the smart thing for titled and propertied families in England to have a black slave or two among the household servants. One of the first to acquire such an exotic status symbol was Lady Ralegh, wife of the Sir Walter Ralegh who figures in the history books for other innovations.[22] Her example was soon followed by the Earl of Dorset[23] and others, but the practice was not to become general until the second half of the seventeenth century. In 1599 one Denis Edwards wrote to the Earl of Hertford's secretary: 'Pray enquire after and secure my negress: she is certainly at the "Swan", a Dane's beer-shop, Turnbull Street, Clerkenwell.'[24] This cryptic reference has been read as suggesting the presence of black prostitutes in Elizabethan London, and there is, perhaps, supporting evidence in the fact that the part of the 'Abbess *de Clerkenwell*' – 'abbess', in this context, means brothel-keeper – in the Gray's Inn revels at Christmas 1594 was played by a woman called Lucy Negro (whom one authority identifies as Shakespeare's Dark Lady).[25] There were certainly black entertainers at court well before the turn of the century, like the 'lytle Blackamore' for whom, not long after 1577, a 'Gascon coate' was made, of 'white Taffata, cut and lyned under with tincel, striped down with gold and silver, and lined with buckram and bayes, poynted with poynts and ribands'.[26] In the 1570s Queen Elizabeth was shown with a group of black musicians and dancers entertaining her courtiers and herself. The seven musicians and three boy dancers dressed in scarlet can be seen on a painted panel supposed to depict *Queen Elizabeth and her court at Kenilworth Castle*, attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts

the elder and dating from about 1575;[27] it clearly isn't Kenilworth, but such a group was by now a standard feature of every self-respecting European court, as will appear. To disguise themselves as black women in masquerades became a favourite pastime among the queen's ladies-in-waiting.[28]

Queen Elizabeth's response

However entertaining she may have found them at court, the queen was soon expressing strong disapproval of the presence of black people elsewhere in her realm and, indeed, ordering that 'those kinde of people' should be deported forthwith. This episode rarely figures in the history books, and it is easy to see why. Elizabeth's professed reasons were that there were enough people in England without 'blackmoores' (the population was around 3,000,000); that they were taking food out of her subjects' mouths (there had been a series of bad harvests); and that in any case most of them were 'infidels'. A further reason has been suggested: the widespread belief, more firmly held than ever in the reign of a virgin queen of exceptional pallor, that whiteness stood for purity, virtue, beauty, and beneficence, whereas anything black was bound to be filthy, base, ugly, and evil.[1] Like Septimius Severus, many English people did tend to think that way. But was Elizabeth's action merely crude xenophobia? To answer this question we have to examine the documents, which have rarely been printed (and the most accessible version of one of which is marred by errors of transcription).

On 11 July 1596, Elizabeth caused an open letter to be sent to the lord mayor of London and his aldermen, and to the mayors and sheriffs of other towns, in the following terms:

> Her Majestie understanding that there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready here to manie . . . Her Majesty's pleasure therefore ys that those kinde of people should be sent forth of the lande, and for that purpose there ys direction given to this bearer Edwarde Banes to take of those blackmoores that in this last voyage under Sir Thomas Baskerville were brought into this realme the nomber of tenn, to be transported by him out of the realme. Wherein wee require you to be aydinge and assysting unto him as he shall have occacion, therof not to faile.