# A Critique of Fela Anikulapo's "Blackism" as a Failed Instance of the Valorisation of Blackness

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**Abstract**
The aim of this essay is to show that instances of valorising blackness have turned out to be harmful to African peoples. Whereas there have been several movements such as Black Power Movement, Black Consciousness Movement as well as individuals such as Steve Biko, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor, William DuBois, Edward Blyden, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, it is the case that none of these minds made the conscious effort to interrogate the literal and symbolic use of black for Africans. Consequently, this research limits its scope to Fela's valorisation of blackness as enshrined in his blackism. Using the method of critical analysis, it argues that Fela's "Blackism" takes the categorical and symbolic implications of blackness to an uncritical assimilation. The present study submits that until the ideological underpinning of the categorical and symbolic uses of blackness for Africans is engaged, all valorisation attempts will continue to yield meagre outputs. The first task is therefore to disclose the Eurocentric campaigns that mitigated the worth of the original or traditional people of Africa, south of the Sahara as well as he arrays of rejoinders which led to the valorisation of blackness. Afterward, Fela's version of valorisation as encapsulated within the fold of his blackism will be disinterred. The rest of the paper shows not only that the valorisation agenda was a failed project but also that Fela's "Blackism" is one of these failed projects.
**Keywords:** Africa, Black, Fela, Race, Identity.

## Introduction

The concept 'black' as a referential frame for [the] Africa[n], south of the Sahara, originated in Europe. 'Black' within this context has two uses: categorical and symbolic. The first denotes racial discrimination. In the second sense, it signifies all things evil, savage, barbaric, morally inferior, and less human being ascribed to Africans. The *symbolic* usage which has shaped Western prejudice against the 'African,' is well demonstrated in several fictional literatures of ancient Greece and Rome as well as early modern English works, as William Shakespeare's. The *categorical* employment of the concept is informed by the *symbolic* modifier, which justifies the racial inferiority of 'Africans' and hence domination and oppression. Fela Anikulapo's "blackism" emanates as an ideology to counter the domination and oppression of 'Africans.' Just like the Black Power Movement in the United States, Fela's "blackism" admits the use of the term 'black' to foster a sense of pride, identity and the consciousness for overcoming the impasses of exploitation and denigration against 'Africa' by the West. This is a form of valorisation. Granted, the valorisation ideal is to emancipate and raise the

awareness of 'Africans' via a positive semantic of 'black' in spite of its dehumanising use by the West (OFUASIA 2019), I contend that such valorisation is a failed agenda since it does not erase from the assumed and uncritical Western understanding, the derogatory [symbolic] depiction of same. The valorisation may provide the rigour and vigour to confront the oppressor and their accomplices with pride, it does not however correct the oppressor's long-held perception that 'Africans' are inferior humans because they are black. For this reason, I propose that the concept 'Africa' be replaced by Africans themselves after engaging the matter critically, especially as they had names for themselves prior Western contact. To attain these, it is important to first consider the question of African identity as understood by Westerners. This is the onus of the next section.

### The Discourse and Counter-Discourse of the Dignity and Worth of Being Black

The encounter of 'black' Africans with the West led to a torrent of scholarly verdicts that examined their dignity and worth. Africa is not among Hegel's four cultures or civilizations. From Hegel's (1956) perspective, Africa is said to be unhistorical; undeveloped spirit – still involved in the conditions of mere nature; devoid of morality, religions and political constitution. This is a position that has the capacity to pass people from the continent as inferior beings (KUYKENDALL 1993, 572). Hence, he holds that there is a justification for Europe's enslavement and colonisation of Africa. For this reason, Hegel (1956) admits that slavery causes the increase of human feeling among the Negroes. In his lectures delivered in the winter of 1830–1 on the philosophical history of the world, Hegel clearly declared: ''Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit'' (1956, 99). In this connection about the denigration of the Negroes, Theophile Obenga (2004, 33) Responds:

> This view of the Hegelian philosophy of history has become almost a common opinion and an academic paradigm in Western historiography. It has been regarded as canon that a great culture or civilization cannot be produced by African (Black) people. This also implies that Africans have never made any kind of contribution to world history.

The foregoing is not original to the implications of Hegel alone. Other scholars such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant have portrayed Africans in a negative light as well.

In his essay "Of National Characters", David Hume exhibited his aversion and contempt for the black man. Because of his belief that a person's intellectual ability or otherwise is a function of his or her nativity or racial descent, Hume held that the African (the black-man) is incapable of logical thinking and is therefore intellectually unproductive, among other inadequacies. David Hume has absolutely no respect for the peoples that are called Africans. He believes very strongly in the idea that Europe is the model of humanity, culture and is history itself. It is this type of belief that led Hume to declare that: "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised

notion of that complexion; nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation…" (HUME 1985, 319).

This means that Hume (1985) attaches great importance to complexion (the colour of a person's skin), and accords it a prominent role in the determination of a person's rationality or irrationality. Here, Hume falls into the same error of causality which he earlier refused in his [An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding], by saying that there is a causal relation between a person's skin colour and his intellectual capacity. Thus, for Hume, it is skin difference that accounts for diversity and intellectuality of humanity. So, non-white skin peoples are not capable of being as intelligent as white skin peoples. This is as categorically incorrect as it is contradictory.

As a result of these demeaning warrants and castigations, some scholars of African descent rose to the challenge of attempting to quell the impending identity implication. One weapon employed is the valorisation of blackness – the locus that being black-skinned does not make an individual a lesser human being. William du Bois responds to the charges of Eurocentrism that I mentioned earlier in this work. He proposes the theory of 'double consciousness' as a true reflection of the man of colour. The notion of double consciousness describes the individual sensation as though their identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one single identity. He speaks within the context of race and identity in the United States. Double consciousness forces blacks to free themselves from their unique perspective but also to view themselves as they might be perceived by the outside world (DU BOIS 1989).

Bell Hooks (1992) is popular for her attempt to transform 'black' into a positive idea via decolonisation. To decolonise the term 'black' for Hooks means that one must appreciate the inherent value in the term as used to refer to native Africans. For her, to decolonise does not mean to "negate the value of blackness" (HOOKS 1992, 17) or "to have contempt for blackness." Similarly, to decolonise is "to define black positively, to reclaim black identity that has previously been denied and to hold the conviction that black is beautiful" (HOOKS 1992, 18).

On his part, Leopold Sedar Senghor puts forward the philosophy of negritude which has close interface with his African socialism.  Although he did not give it a clear definition, Senghor thought of African socialism as part of his humanism which, in turn, is a function of Africa's Negritude. He commenced with what he perceived as a clear distinction between the Negro-African society and what he called ''the collectivist European society'', in the following words:

> I would say that the latter is an assembly of individuals. The collectivist society inevitably places the emphasis on the individual, on his original activity and his needs. In this respect, the debate between ''to each according to his labour'' and ''to each according to his needs'' is significant. Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society. This does not mean that it ignores the individual, or that collectivist society ignores solidarity, but the latter bases this solidarity on the activities of individuals, whereas the community

society bases it on the general activity of the group (SENGHOR 1964, 93–4).

As revealed in the above, Senghor explains how the African perceives people and world. It is the way s/he feels and thinks, in union not only with all other people around him but ''indeed with all other beings in the universe: God, animal, tree, or pebble'' (SENGHOR 1964, 94); (OFUASIA 2015). Senghor's earlier work including his definition of Negritude, had addressed the naturalness with which Africans embrace and participate in nature rather than relating to it cognitively from a distance. In other words, for him, the communitarian habits of Africans are not acquired; rather, they are part of the African way of expressing being.

Aside individuals, movements soon erupted to justify and correct the misleading and demeaning presentation of black Africans. One of the most prominent here is the Black Consciousness Movement. This Movement is one of the liberation movements that emerged in apartheid South Africa. The movement did not find anything wrong symbolically with the use of black. The aim however was to use the concept for the restoration of the dignity of the native African "whose pride, life and humanity had been taken from them by apartheid in South Africa and more generally by colonisation of the African continent" (TSRI 2016a, 153). In the words of Steve Biko (1978, 48) blackness in Black Consciousness "is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude." In this regard, the essence of being black is located in the experience of racial oppression and not in relation to skin pigmentation (TSRI 2016a, 153). The Movement has three cardinal ideas. First, it maintains that "blacks were made to fit into patterns determined by whites" (BIKO 1978, 18). Second, it contends that "most of the so-called African intellectuals lacked a depth of insight into what can be done to radically transform the unenviable state of existence of the majority of Africans" (BIKO 1978, 18). Third, it is also the admission that "the same questions are asked and the same naiveté exhibited in answering them" (BIKO 1978, 23). Biko's Black Consciousness, therefore seeks to put blacks in their rightful place. The Movement does not find anything wrong especially with the symbolic use of the colour to characterise African nature and personality.

Now that we have considered the various ways to respond to the misrepresented opinions concerning the dignity of being black, it is now important to clamp down on Fela's Blackism, which needs to be revealed as one of the failed instances of the valorisation agenda.

## Fela's Blackism and the Valorisation Agenda

Fela Anikulapo Kuti was a Nigerian legendary musician, activist, social and political critic who throughout his life sought the complete emancipation of Africa from colonial jaws. Fela was also critical of the postcolonial governance both in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, also stressing what he considers non-negotiable – Africa's unity, just like Kwame Nkrumah.

It needs to be stated categorically that Fela's 'Blackism' (also called Africanism) corresponds to the Black Power Movement (BPM) in the United States of America. The Black Power Movement "took its genesis from the varieties of that African/Black nationalism tradition and the nationalist sentiment

of the African (Black)-American community of the U.S. in the 20th century" (BOTCHWAY 2014, 4).

Fela, from the 1970s, viewed the BPM as an embodiment of a grand idea and attitude he referred to as "Blackism" or "Africanism," although Fela did not originate the term. As early as 1965, Remi Fani-Kayode, a Nigerian lawyer, intellectual, and anti-colonialist, used the term Blackism and defined it in his booklet, *Blackism*, as a political concept "based on the fact that only Blackmen(women) can save the Blackman(woman) in the final analysis, and that a joint effort for the progress of the Blackman(woman) must be made together by all Blackmen(women) all over the world" (FANI-KAYODE 1965, 13). Fani-Kayode (1965, 34) asserted that the life blood of independent African states is unity and Blackism was "the spiritual inner force that must compel union; Blackism is the mental force that would ensure that Black progress must depend on Black strength and Black bargaining power with the white world."

Fela deemed Blackism/Africanism as a "Force of the Mind"—an intellectual awareness that advocated the promotion of Afrocentric ways of life as a strategy to globally liberate Blacks/Africans from all forms of mental enslavement induced by slave trade and colonialism (BOTCHWAY 2014, 8). It aimed to obliterate all forms of Black/African-on-Black/African oppression and all non-African cultural dominations that had aided neo-colonialism in Africa. Its objective was to unite the international and continental peoples of Black/African descent and instil in the Black/African person a sense of possibility and sharp creative imagination and capacity anchored on an intellect or psychology of pride in their "Black/African" being, culture, and creativity (BOTCHWAY 2014, 8).

Fela's notion of Blackism, which his musical career popularised, shared the central ideas of unity, self-reliance, and cultural pride of Pan-Africanism with that of Fani-Kayode. From 1969 till his death in 1997, Fela became an uncompromising advocate of the BPM and endeavoured to contextualise it in Africa. He made sense of its goals and promoted different shades of Black Power ideology through the popular art of music (BOTCHWAY 2014, 8). Specifically, Blackism, emerged around 1977 and championed Pan-Africanism and Negritude, intellectual and cultural radicalism, physical militancy, research and participation in African indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, and special rites of passage (BOTCHWAY 2014, 23). Seeking the progress of Africa and her peoples in the diaspora, the movement aimed to re-establish pride in Black history and prevent all acts that tarnished the image of members of the Black/African nation. It also promoted the notion that Black consciousness and spirituality and an African personality were necessary tools to direct the Black/African mind and body toward Black realism and determinism (BOTCHWAY 2014, 23).

One point is clear or evident in the exposition given to the main kernel of being black in Fela. It was aimed at changing the oppressor's outlook that being black does not make him or her a lesser human. Granted, this move is bold and has raised the consciousness of blacks, it has yet to change the oppressor's use of black in a categorical and symbolic sense. Unless this perception changes, all exercises in valorisation are still vegetative, for the one has yet to be acknowledged by the other as human. The one has only engaged in affirming

himself as human. In the next section, I will explain why this is so as we return as far as ancient Greece with Kwesi Tsri (2016a; 2016b) as our guide.

## The Subtle Categorical and Symbolic Use of Black for Africans: Why Blackism Fails

Two crucial issues will be explored within the context of this inquiry. The first is to ask if the colour 'black' were used by Africans for themselves or not. This is crucial since the Ethiopians, for instance used to call themselves autochthon, which denotes those who sprung from the ground (DIOP 1987). However, it may be said that these are not the only group of people in Africa. On this note, Kwesi Tsri (2016b) maintains that: "In Africa today, many groups are identified by the names of the languages they speak, such as Ewe, Gã, Fante, Krobo, Wolof, Ibo, Yoruba and many others. Thus, in general, geographical location and language continue to be available as the core elements around which group identities can be constructed. The renaming and homogenisation of peoples of Africa and their cultures by reducing them to the term 'black' and its objectionable symbolisms were not of their own making, but were imposed on them by others." Hence, the second task of the present section is to consider how the colour category carries a deluge of misrepresented and demeaning flavours, all of which seek to diminish the fame and prowess of Africans.

It is therefore pertinent to admit first of all that the 'black' has been in use since classical times as a connotation for dark deeds, evil, sorrow, death, the underworld, deities with bad characters and it was used to personify "*Kip*" the goddess of death (PRICE 1883, 1). This is a fact that has also been affirmed by historian Frank Snowden (1983). The Greek word for 'black' which is "melas" is definitely used for things negative and derogatory (CHIMAKONAM 2018a/b); (TSRI 2016a/b). On the other hand, the concept, 'white' which is "*leukos*" expresses or symbolises the expression of light and life (PRICE 1883, 1).

White denotes all things positive, cheerful and superior. Tsri (2016b) makes a historical examination of the symbolic notions of 'white' and 'black' only to arrive at the conclusion that the colour 'white' signifies superiority, moral excellence, etc., and the colour 'black' used in categorising the African stock signifies that which is demonic, evil, savage, barbaric and morally inferior. It is from this symbolic use of the terms that the one was ascribed on black Africans while the other was reserved for the European stock. According to Tsri (2016, 148) "available historical evidence shows that the ancient Greeks used both the terms Ethiopians and black interchangeably for Africans." It is also instructive to state that the term 'Ethiopian' which translates literally as "burnt face" or "sun-burnt-face" to categorise black Africans may be traced to the Greek poet Homer (SNOWDEN 1971); (HANNAFORD 1996); (THOMPSON 1989). It is also true that "by the time of Xenophanes (570-480 B.C.E), Ethiopians were identified a bit more precisely as black with Negroid flat noses and woolly hair" just as "fifth century B.C.E literature located Ethiopians in the vague hinterland called Africa" (Hood, 1994: 36). When and how, then did it become dominant, the use of the concept 'black' for Africans? This is one of the core contentions of Kwesi Tsri (2016a, 148) who informs that:

As early as their initial encounter with Africans, the ancient Greeks, followed by the Romans, conceived of and differentiated Africans, not on the basis of culture, language or self-ascribed identities, but instead on the basis of the perceived colour of their skin and other physical features. The Greco-Roman knowledge of Africans was considerably enlarged through detailed descriptions of their skin colour and other physical characteristics and this resulted in the creation of particular images of Africans which in turn differentiated them from other non-Greeks and non-Romans. Henceforth, the terms 'Ethiopians', 'black' and their related created concepts became the framework through which Africans were conceived of and depicted.

What we have been able to do thus far is to show that there is a connection between the symbolic and categorical understandings of these concepts. It is also clear that the former fuels the latter. Consequent of the interchangeable use of 'black' for native Africans is that, "a link was established between the humanity and cultures of Africans and the negative symbolisms that the term 'black' evoked" (TSRI 2016a, 148). The implications of this linkage are grave since all the negative symbolisms of the term 'black' was exported to the native African society. Several literatures soon sprung to justify this. The symbolic connotation of black to categorise Africans found Africans being described as savages with natural tendency to evil, harbingers of bad luck and disaster (BERNAL 1987); (SNOWDEN 1971); (TSRI 2016a/b); (CHIMAKONAM 2018). Similarly, Benjamin Isaac (2004) refers to Aristotle who made the analogy that equates the heat of the sun and its effects that shrinks a piece of wood to the body and nature of Africans being affected by the heat of the sun. The end result of the symbolic and categorical use of 'black' for Africans is their depiction as inferior to those passed as 'white.' This contention was fully blown in the early Christian literatures which also renders the native African as necessarily sinful by nature. There is a tradition traced to Origen that at one time we were *Ethiopians (Aethiopes)* in our vices and sins. How so? Because our sins had *blackened* us' (BYRON 2002: 43 emphasis in original). Jerome, another prominent early Christian exegete, refers to the people of Ethiopia as 'black and cloaked in the filth of sin' (BYRON 2002, 55).

Christian church fathers and literatures use the term 'black' to refer to Satan and 'white' for God. In the *Epistle of Barnabas,* an early Christian literature, Satan is referred to as the Black One (Byron 2002); (OFUASIA 2019). In the *Life of Melania the Young,* it was recorded that the devil metamorphosed into a young black man and was misleading Christian women (BYRON, 2002). In the Bible itself, a reference is made to the skin of Ethiopians and evil in the same context. For example, "can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil?" (JER 13, 23). The leopard is used in this context as a symbol of unchangeableness, which figuratively expresses the indelibility of the sin of Ethiopians (FERBER 1999). In the end, it is clear that "the early Christian exegetes did not only describe and categorise Africans as black, but they also found it appropriate to present them as black in a symbolic sense. They considered the colour black and the term 'Ethiopian' as synonyms,

and used both as religious terms for demons, evil, sin and carnal lust" (TSRI 2016a, 149).

The symbolic use of these colours has also come down to the present times where people are categorised and rendered as either disadvantaged or privileged. The stories of apartheid in almost all parts of the world attest to this fact. The colour categorisations 'black' and 'white' also justify colonialism and imperialism. This is aptly captured in the words of Claude Ake thus:

> … more emphasis was placed on the justification of colonialism as a service to the colonized people. What service? Essentially the service of civilizing them. That is why colonialism was 'popularly' referred to by colonizers as a civilizing mission. According to the theory, the civilization of the native, includes among other things, bringing them Western Education, the benefits of Western technology, bringing them into the stream of human history, getting them to discard their 'barbaric culture' and generally redeeming a way of life captive to ignorance, poverty and disease. (AKE 1981, 83)

All of the above clearly attest to the circumspection that Blackism, by merely admitting that indeed Africans are black, innocently or subtly reinforces the categorical and symbolic use of same in the minds of the oppressor. This is one lesson that Fela with his valorisation cause fails to understand. One cannot talk about being black as a matter to be proud of when other species of the Homo grade see black-skin with a different eye. Blackism, on this front therefore fails.

At this juncture, a critic could counter how the colour-perception can inform issues of peace and development especially in the fragile and troubled regions of sub-Saharan Africa. This connection is already clear owing to the psychological given that all things black are bad and all things white are good. These symbolic undertones in these colours have the capacity to make Africans feel inferior and ever dependent on their former colonisers. In the end, peace and development and even knowledge will be dictated by the desirable colour – white. This has been demonstrated in the condemnable Afrophobic and xenophobic attacks that have escalated in several parts of Africa (see ARIBIAH & AZEEZ 2021). The ways through which Africans continue to hate themselves and even attack themselves when non-Africans are spared are clear indications of how the oppressed continues to be psychologically affected by symbolic implications of the colour, black.

**Conclusion**
Fela's Blackism or Africanism is no doubt one of the emergent mental attitudes of the preceding century – an attitude calculated to elicit confrontation and agitation against the excesses of the oppressor. Our contention however is that Fela's Blackism, being an agenda of valorisation fails to address the perception of the oppressor concerning the dignity and worth of the human person since the categorical and symbolic use of the terms have yet to be refuted. The onus of this essay is to bring this to limelight and emphasise that valorisation yields a less

desirable result. The peoples of Africa need to revisit this issue, rename themselves, if possible and drop the use of black and its symbolic undertone which girds the categorical discrepancies. Unless this is done, the oppressor will continually perceive the peoples of Africa as lesser humans. This research does not boast to have the final answer to the question of the renaming of the indigenous peoples of the continent. Its primary goal is to show that the admission of the term 'black' to refer to the peoples of Africa needs to be carefully examined, otherwise, the continuous derogatory features the colour had generated in history will continue to be applied to them.

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