

CHAPTER 1

## **STOP CALLING HUMANS BLACK AND WHITE —Opening Statement**

Ladies and gentlemen of the world jury, I bow before you in deep humility and honour.

Before I proceed to outline my case, I want to stress that this campaign was initiated not out of anger, scorn, resentment, or in the spirit of retaliation etc., but rather on a point of principle.

In his book *John North Willys*, Elbert Hubbard, the nineteenth-century American writer, publisher, artist, and philosopher, wrote: “Do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing, and you’ll never be criticized.” Well, for the sake of principle, I cannot “Do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing” concerning this fundamental issue of unfair, discriminatory, biased, non-objective classification of God’s children into “black” for malice and “white” for innocence!

So, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I herewith present my case. May I please beg you to pay close attention to the matter.

Presently, it is an accepted practice to call people of African descent “black” and those of European “white”.

I would have had no difficulty with the matter if indeed the classification was objectively grounded –if indeed there were typically black and typically white individuals walking the surface of the earth.

That, however, is not the case. In other words, the classification is an artificial construct that is not at par with reality.

Since black is associated with evil and white good, designating humans in such a manner leads to negative stereotyping and stigmatisation.

Before I proceed any further, I want to take the jury to the very beginning of human existence – to the fundamental question of how humans came to populate the earth.

It is superfluous to mention here that there were no humans around to witness the very moment when the universe came into being. So the issue of how the universe came into being and how life on earth and, for that matter, human life began has been and continues to be a contentious issue. It is beyond the remit of the present discourse to reignite the huge debate that has been going on over centuries on the matter.

For the present discussion, I want to state that there are basically two main schools of thought on the matter.

On the one hand are those who believe that Almighty God created the universe and that it contains plants, birds of the air and land, fishes of the rivers and oceans, beasts of the land etc. As a climax of His creation, God created humans.

The second school of thought comprises those who either do not believe in God or, even if they do believe in God, hold the view that life developed gradually over millions of years by way of evolution. Concerning humans, this group holds the view that they evolved from ape-like beings. This book is not a forum for debate on the matter.

What then led to the various skin colours of humans?

First, I will look at the matter from the God the Creator version. Whilst trying to maintain neutrality on the issue at hand, I want to make it known to the jury that I personally ascribe to the Creator God version of how the universe and human life came into existence in the universe. The creation story in Genesis on which this group base their case does not explicitly deal with the matter of how the various skin colouration came into being. Based on my own insight in the matter, an insight acquired by way of my professional background, I dare to present this explanation. I want to stress that this is my own subjective view on the matter – the jury may choose to dismiss or accept it.

As already mentioned, I believe that Almighty God created humans. Based on the Bible the original parents of humankind were Adam and Eve.

To be protected from the harmful effects of the ultra-violet (UV) rays of the sun, the absorption of which can lead to skin cancer, the Creator God endowed the epidermis, the outer layer of the human skin with cells known as melanocytes. It is worth noting that melanocytes are distributed equally in skins of all humans, irrespective of which population group they belong to.

The function of melanocytes is the production of melanin. Melanin on its part shields the body from the harmful effect of UV radiation.

As humans began to multiply on earth, they migrated to various parts of the globe. Humans who migrated to areas of abundant sunshine needed considerable amounts of melanin to shield them against the harmful effects of the ever-present sunshine. To adapt to the new environment, over the years, the cells responsible for the production of the protective melanin became permanently active in performing their vital function of melanin production. The abundance of melanin endowed the population a skin hue from light brown to the darkest dark brown.

Conversely, the melanocytes of fellow humans who settled in the cold climatic zone where the sun barely shone did not need as much protection from the sun – certainly not to the same extent as did those who settled in the sun. Over the years, the cells responsible for the production of the pigment became somewhat dormant, leaving them with a pale hue of skin.

Many people do not believe in a Creator God as the originator of life on earth. Concerning the differing skin colours of humans, they hold the view that the difference developed through the principle of natural selection and adaptation. They hold to the view that the skins of humans who after the evolutionary process found themselves in the sunny areas of the planet adapted themselves to the exposure through the production of melanin in quantities needed to protect their skins from the harmful effect of UV radiation – hence the typically dark-skinned colour of people of African descent.

Certainly these are very simplified versions of the two prevailing but opposing viewpoints on the issue of the beginning of mankind. This is not the forum for a detailed discussion on the matter.

Whether one believes in a Creator God or in evolution, one fact remains crystal clear – there are no purely white and purely black humans on earth. There are indeed those whose skin colour could be described as darkest brown, approaching black, but pure black – the way I can without doubt refer to the colour of the laptop I am writing on – there are none. The converse is true – there are fellow humans who have a really light complexion, which could be regarded as approaching white, but a really white skin-coloured person, whose complexion could be described as "as white as snow", I am yet to meet.

So when did it all begin? When did humans begin to call a section of the human population black and another section white? How did we end up with the concept of the "black" and "white" human race?

Before I tackle that issue, I want to take the jury to the era of European exploration. Prior to the period of European expeditions to other lands, the idea of "white" and "black" was non-existent. It is beyond the remit of this discourse to delve deep into the complex theme of European exploration, conquest and subsequent exploitation of other population groups. I only want to provide a brief overview.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, European explorers arrived on the west African coast. Human beings, who by virtue of their stay in the cold climates had over the years developed a fair skin complexion, for the first time came into contact with fellow humans who had developed various shades of dark skin complexions due to their exposure to the sun. I can imagine how surprised both parties were at the very first meeting – humans who, but for their skin complexions, were identical in every respect, meeting for the first time!! The fact neither parties could understand the other would have made the drama surrounding the extraordinary meeting of humans even more intense.

Following the shock, came the realisation that, despite the differing skin colours and the language barriers, they were all humans after all.

Soon both parties got down to business. In due time they traded for their mutual benefit. Through the process of silent barter, the foreigners and natives traded with each other. The natives had something the newcomers wanted – gold. The newcomers had brought something the natives needed – clothes guns, and other manufactured good.

If only the newcomers would restrict themselves in the trade in wares; but they wouldn't! In due course, trade was extended into the trade in humans. So began the transatlantic slave trade, which was to last for over 400 years. Though figures are not precise, it is estimated that around 12–13 million Africans were sold during the period. Though some ended up in Europe, the vast majority were shipped across the Atlantic to North and South America. The transatlantic slave trade was officially abolished on 1 January 1808.

Not only did the trade result in the depletion of the African population, it also created the conditions for the subsequent colonial conquest of Africa by the European powers.

It was during the period of European involvement in Africa that the terms “black” and “white” to describe humans were invented.

The first recorded reference to Europeans as “white” was in the play *The Triumphs of Truth*, by the English playwright Thomas Middleton. Performed for the first time on 29 October 1613, a character depicting an African king looked upon the English audience and declared: “I see amazement set upon the faces/Of these white people, wond'rings and strange gazes.”

The concept of the “white” European, at least as far as any written record bears witness, was thus born. Put in other words, the concept of the “white” person is only a little over 400 years old.

If only the matter had ended there! But no – whiteness would only make sense if posed next to blackness. Where could one invent blackness, but in the “dark” African continent! Thus every resident of that continent, from the pale-coloured Igbo of Nigeria to the darkest brown coloured Masai of Kenya, were all dumped in the black pot of blackness!

One might have allowed the matter to rest – but for the negative connotations.

A child born into the world by African parents has a huge disadvantage to start with, even if his skin is as light coloured as an Igbo of Nigeria. As everyone is calling them black, a colour associated with all types of evil and negative connotations, they are forced to shoulder the additional burden of the negative association and stigmatisation throughout their lives.

On the other hand, the child born to a European is called white, even though he or she is not actually white, and as white is associated with innocence and purity, they are looked upon more favourably by society.

Should the “black” individual and the “white” individual later appear for an interview, even though they have the same grades, because individual who is “black” is associated with malice and inferiority and the “white” counterpart with goodness and superiority, the latter stands a better chance of being selected.

In his 1967 essay, "The English Language is My Enemy", the American author, playwright and civil rights activist Ossie Davis, lamented the strongly negative connotations of the word "black" and its synonyms in English.

Well, I don't think the English language per se is his enemy. As I will allude to later in this discourse the association of black to bad things is not unique to the English language – it is also found in several other languages including German. I am mentioning German because it is the only European language apart from English that I am conversant with. Members of the jury may be familiar with connotations in their vernacular and other languages with which they are familiar.

The real enemy is not the English language. In my opinion, the real enemy is the world population that has come to accept the usage of those terms, coined by a human being over 400 years ago, as normal – as part and parcel of everyday language.

I personally ask myself why we have accepted the designation "black" in mainstream language to describe people of Africa descent – those whose skin complexion is as fair as the Igbo of Nigeria – but feel offended by the use of the term "nigger" to describe Africans? The term "nigger" is indeed considered so offensive it is often referred by the euphemism the "N-word". Personally, I also find it offensive to call me black when I am not! Some may recognise a difference between the two designations but, as far as I am concerned, referring to me as black is just as derogatory as calling me nigger!

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I ask myself: why should we allow a construct created 400 years ago, at a time when the trade in humans was considered normal, to be officially sanctioned in modern times, in the social media age of the twenty-first century?

Calling me black even though I am chocolate brown coloured, immediately leads to associations. Even if the large majority of humans would not see things that way, still a significant number would be inclined to do just that.

So if I happen to be walking on the streets of London, with an English person of my age who perhaps work in security (nothing wrong with that – it is only an illustration), then by virtue of my skin colour the police may be inclined to stop and search me and allow the English fellow to go his way – even if I managed to make it from my impoverished background, forced by poverty to sleep on a mat spread on the bare floor of our dilapidated home, all the way to the prestigious Hanover Medical School in Germany! Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I hope you are gradually getting an idea as to how far the association with the degraded colour "black" can negatively impact on one's journey through life.

I will return to the matter in my closing statement. For now I want to dedicate myself to something else.