

# **Undeniable Complacency of Western World Anthropology Scholars Ignorance in Acknowledging the Equality of Human Races: Revisiting Anténor Firmin in the New Millennium**

by

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## **Abstract**

Irrespective of the denial of the Western World anthropology scholars' acknowledgement of the world's ethnic groupings contribution to civilization Anténor Firmin predicted that "...in less than a century from now, a Black man might be called to head the Government of Washington and manage the affairs of the most progressive and powerful country on earth". This evidence should strike the first most powerful blow against the Western world anthropology scholars' theory of inequality of human races. Two of the most heinous atrocities perpetrated by the colonialists were the classification of human race, especially African people, and the derogatory concepts they used to describe them – coloureds, blacks and natives not mentioning the enslaved or Negroes. David Walker's publication "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World" in September 1829 triggered Nat Turner's insurrection. American White slave owners went to fantastic lengths to suppress it and the pamphlet was, according to slave masters "inappropriate and incendiary". In his article II titled "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance" Walker pleaded "Ignorance, my brethren, is a mist, low down into the very dark and almost impenetrable abyss in which, our fathers for many centuries have been plunged.....". South Africa has had its fair share of the plunging of the colonialists' sexual art works of painting of human beings which they derogatorily classified as coloureds. These are not utopian musings. We have to consider the increasing participation of Blacks in world politics to cast aside the scepticisms. This paper provides an empirical account of the epistemology of the undeniable complacency of the Western World anthropologists' ignorance in acknowledging the equality of human races. This is a re-visitation of Anténor Firmin's treatise – The Equality of the Human Races.

## **Introduction**

According to Firmin (2002: 83), "...To embrace the concept of the unity of the species involves, through the exercise of a great keenness of mind, rejecting all the false ideas that the existence of diverse races might inspire and seeing, instead, only the beings capable of understanding one another of joining their individual destinies into a common destiny. That is civilization, that is, the highest level of physical, moral and intellectual achievement of the species. There can be no greater and more salutary source of fraternal sentiments among the different races and peoples than such an understanding of the idea of the unity of the species".

This proclamation by Firmin is the most innate and essential belief in unity that makes one sacred to another without one having to involve vague, irregular and inconsistent dichotomous notions of speculative morality, the foundations of which change according to time and place. In other words, it is important to consider the idea of one of those primordial truths which serve as postulates to all social principles. The reason is that the idea of the unity of the human species elevates those principles and its influence tends to attenuate competition and conflict with nations. This is expressively described by the Reggae legend Bob Marley in his album titled *War* – "The philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior...must be abandoned" lest everywhere will be war and that is the universal truth if considered from the perspectives of inferiority and superiority of races which triggered Hitler's contemptuous annihilation of the Jews in World War II, which plunged the whole world into defence of the Jews. This was further illustrated in the American Civil War when slavery was abolished by President Abraham Lincoln and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution. But what has humanity learned from all these? Nothing, because we still foment segregation which became a venom in the South African struggle against Apartheid!

## **Re-Thinking Vicissitudes of Racialism**

We, the generations of the new millennium, must acknowledge the idea of unity of the species to suffice to resolve directly or indirectly the equally controversial issue of the constitution of the human races and their respective attributes in terms of respect and dignity to mutually co-exist in the face of adversity without which we may perish altogether in ignominy. Firmin foresaw the need to do something about the classification of the human races by whoever was tasked with the duty of this arduous project and made a mammoth contribution to put straight the deliberate winding path taken by Western anthropologists' scholars of his time. However, the issue of racial differences still rages on unabated and there is nobody with an extinguisher to put out the flame being fanned to uncontrollable proportions in the new millennium.

In principle, all races are gifted naturally with the same abilities but there are inherent natural individual differences which pertain to environmental factors influencing activities and actions. However, this does not pillage mankind into an environment where one racial group takes advantage of its advantageous environmental and cultural conditions to subjugate others for any reason whatsoever.

Generally, the anti-philosophical and anti-scientific doctrine of the inequality of the races rests on nothing more than the notion of man's exploitation by man. We use and abuse all living beings only because we, as human beings, are deeply convinced of our superiority because we believe that our own unquestionably transcendent destiny takes precedence over their puny existence. Man's sense of superiority over other creatures justifies in the eyes the indisputable right to appropriate and use them as indispensable tools for their own development. If one race were to be recognized as superior to the other human races, the superior race would then have the right to enslave the others by virtue of a natural and logical law according to which the fittest should dominate the earth.

This assertion is similar to the introduction of slavery. Generally, slavery is an injustice only inasmuch as we recognize the virtual equality of all human beings and of all races. To accept the premise of human inequality is to legitimize the enslavement of those who are considered inferior. If it is agreed that in national and international politics all human beings and all races are equally capable of shouldering all responsibilities and equally deserving of receiving honours, then an acceptable scientific theory should be proposed that would be the antithesis of the juridical theory. It can be indicated further that if the human races were really unequal, then slavery would have been justified for its continuous existence. For this reason the slave owner, obviously could not, for a single instant, consider his slave as his equal without being hounded and repulsed by his conscience. This explains it all in terms of racial inferiority and the fiction which degrades a human being and makes an object out of him.

From this perspective it can be indicated that human beings could be considered as a commodity, the possession of which was as natural as it was of any other object. But from the point of view of pure logic, since slavery had existed, a tangible reason – call it theory – would have to be found to legitimize the situation. Axiomatically, a coincidence proves that only the slavers are consistent and logical in propounding the theory of the inequality of the human races and the corollary theory of plurality of species. It seems impossible, therefore that to accept the existence of superior and inferior races without recognizing the right of the former to enslave the latter as long as it serves the slavers' purposes. Logically, the law that prescribes that the best develop themselves by all available means is circumscribed, in social and human relations, only the equality of faculties, which implies the equality of needs. From this analysis no more plausible reason could be invented than the intellectual and moral inferiority which the law presumed to be natural in the enslaved as was the case in ancient Rome and the Americas during the time of the slave trade. However, since slavery met resistance worldwide and was considered unacceptable, it came to be officially abolished. It comes, therefore, to be concluded that all races are equal and no racial group should take advantage of the other.

## **Refuting the Differences of Human Species in Creation**

Anténor Firmin has clearly discussed and refuted the inequality theories of Western anthropologists in terms of the characteristic nuances they used to support their theories. These refutations by Firmin do not need to be restated in this discussion since Firmin's book "The Equality of the Human Races" is available on the market and can be bought and scrutinized by concerned readers about the way he expressed his views on the issue of equality and inequality of the human races. In supporting this Darwin clearly testified in his treatise that "...I cannot discuss here either the various definitions given to the term species. None of these definitions fully satisfies the naturalists, and yet every naturalist knows more or less what he means ("*is meant*" my own words) by species. In general, the term implies the unknown element in an act of creations." Generally, Firmin has shown from the start of his discussion in his book the insanity of all those pretentious conclusions about the presumed superiority of certain races and inferiority of others.

The truth is that the reclamation of Firmin's erudite scholarship is long overdue. The issue of racism persists worldwide in both old and new guises. There is absolute need to expand the scope of anthropological stance to engage in the neglected works that activists, anti-racists and racially subordinated intellectuals contributed in the bygone years; in order to unveil the truth about the nature of the human species and their various dichotomies so that we, the new millennium generation, are able to put behind us the inconsistencies in the classification of human species and instead, find a common theory of destiny where all human species will thrive, live side-by-side and contribute towards the utopian biblical heaven on earth instead of that heaven the Great Books have told us about and yet to be located in our solar system. This is what we need and if we do not do something about it now, the destiny of the human species may disappear into oblivion as did the ancient lost continent of Lemuria under the Atlantic Ocean.

## **The Need for Anténor Firmin's Gospel of Equality of Human Races**

The most important duty that all African intellectuals should group together and consider doing through the provision of recorded documentation supported by authentic data from the African indigenous knowledge system sources is to provide what Kamalu (1990) describes in his book Foundations of African thought as a world view grounded in the African heritage of religion, philosophy, science and art. African people need to reach back into their wealthy past and take along with them all those works and their positive images. We must focus on what is positive so that African people can build on it as a foundation for future education of our younger generation (Boaduo & Gumbi, 2010).

African intellectuals have a duty to push to the forefront the positive aspects out of our indigenous knowledge and ways that have been ignored and misrepresented; which Firmin has clearly elaborated in his book. Doing so will be healthy for African people and humanity as a whole because what is positive about Africa is also positive of humanity.

The African world consists of continental and diaspora African people rich with creativity and all kinds of resources. Africa, as a continent, is the source of ancient wisdom borrowed by ancient Europe during the eras of the European philosophers who deliberately decided not to acknowledge the sources of inspiration they acquired from the African continent during the times they visited North Africa especially Egypt and Timbuktu where education and economic development were at their climax (Boaduo & Gumbi, 2010).

Western intellectuals always look for what is wrong or lacking in Africa in everything. Usually such intellectuals go to libraries where they search for a plethora of books that have been written from a deficit perspective, ceaselessly comparing Africa to Europe or America forgetting that Africa is the cradle of humanity. Despite the glaring truth of this statement, the West refuses to acknowledge Africa's contribution to the progress of humanity in science and technology. It is time African people reclaim the power of redefining and renaming themselves; the power of speaking their own truth and the power to call forth and create a better future for themselves and their future generations to come. To this end, and like what Firmin has proved, African people need to reject the uses of derogatory and disempowering terminologies which tend to put a wedge between African people and create their disorganization. Words of classification like Christian name (Christian name my foot!), illiterate, and peasants, feudal, tribes, third world, developing, underdeveloped, uncivilized, black Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the like should be rejected. Instead, African people should find their own terminologies that recognize their worth and contribution to the advancement of humanity (Boaduo & Gumbi, 2010).

### **Anténor Firmin's Theories and Their Logical Sequences**

Firmin wrote that "...There is one easy way to determine how much truth is to be found in certain propositions and their concomitant theories. One needs only follow the development of the ideas on which they are based to find out what principles they lead to and what consequences they entail for scientific and social laws in general". Firmin has proposed that these theoretical perspectives should be examined to be able to arrive at a conclusion reached by proponents of the various thesis of the inequality of the human races. What he indicated is that if those conclusions are obviously in contradiction with every idea of progress and justice, or even with common sense; if they can be considered possible only by our overthrowing all the ideas generally considered the most correct, the most consistent with humanity's highest aspirations; we would then have every reason to discard as false the theory on which they are based.

The issue of the equality of the races entails a definitive recognition of the equality of all social classes in every nation of the world. In this case the moral principle underlying such recognition thus acquires a universal import which reinforces and consolidates its authority. It can also be included that the struggle for democracy is being waged, wherever social inequality is still a cause of conflict, the doctrine of the equality of the races will be a salutary remedy.

This will be the last blow struck against medieval ideas, the last step towards the abolition of privileges and such is the direction in which all nations are evolving sociologically; and such is the horizon which all enlightened and healthy minds are reaching; for such is the ideal towards which the future on mankind is marching. And as Firmin questioned “Can we say the same about the theory of the inequality of the races?” to the contrary, because this theory entails exclusion, it necessarily leads to the idea that a small group of men, almost as powerful as gods, is destined to subjugate the rest of humanity.

Generally, the theory of inequality of the races logically leads to an oligarchic or despotic system within nations, even in the absence of distinct races. Another question worth asking is “Do scientists and philosophers who argue that the races are not equal want a regime based on distinctions, the establishment of real cases, in their own nations?” and do not such ideas, so contrary to modern aspirations, offer the best proof of intellectual aberration, which is the fate awaiting anyone who argues against the truth and the natural laws?

De Gobineau, seeing in the majority of white people only contaminated beings starts singing a hymn of desolation “...The white species,” he writes, “taken in the abstract, has forever disappeared from the face of the earth. After the age of the gods, when it was absolutely pure; after the age of the heroes. When race mixing was infrequent and moderate; after the age of the nobles, when still great faculties were no longer renewed at dried out sources, it went on, more or less quickly depending on the place, irreversibly to confuse all its principles as a consequence of all its heterogeneous unions” (De Gobineau: loco citato, Vol II, p. 569).

As further observed by De Gobineau (Loco citato, vol II, p. 563) “...beyond the patent error and historical inconsistency in this sequence of facts imagined by the paradoxical author of *The Inequality of the Human Races*, one obvious concern underlies all the ideas he expresses here. In his view, the abolition of the nobility by the French Revolution is the last blow struck against his idols. De Gobineau predicts that humanity as a whole will decline and decline and die as the result of promiscuous relations among the different ethnic groups. The life principle which resides in the White race alone, will eventually dry out at the source as the race spreads it about too profligately. ... And the duration of man’s dominance on earth encompasses a total of twelve to fourteen thousand years divided into two distinct periods. In the first period, already in the past, the species enjoyed youth, vigour and intellectual greatness; in the second period, which has already begun, it is marching towards its decline and decrepitude”.

Firmin has questioned De Gattineau’s observation thus “...Are not such thoughts those of a sick mind? Does it not seem that what distinguishes all false theories is the fact that they inevitably lead to conclusions which violate logic and oppose universal aspirations?” The conclusions reached by anthropologists, in this stance, who support or accept the doctrine of superior and inferior races are no rational and according to most of these anthropologists, all other human races are condemned to disappear to leave room for the White race to develop (Firmin, 2002).

According to Topinard (loco citato, p. 543 cited in Firmin, 2002: 439) , "...It is easy to foretell a time when those races who shorten the distance between the White man and the anthropoid will have completely disappeared". This reminds humankind of the disappearance of the Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malay and the American races in their entirety. This is comparable to imagining that all the land areas of Asia, Africa, Americas and the Oceania losing their entire population so that the weakened race of a bloodless Europe can have sufficient room to develop. This though simply reveals the mocking expectations of the truth from these anthropologists.

Firmin (2002: 440) observed these "... unpleasant or repugnant ideas are given a scientific veneer, so" that "...these arbitrary propositions are propped up on some theoretical foundation". To this Topinard observed that "...There is nothing mysterious in this extinction" and "...the underlying mechanism is quite natural. What is involved here, in sum, is the survival of the fittest, which is to the advantage of the superior races" (No source reference).

And as Firmin (2002: 440) clearly explained, "...Just as the climate confers to native plants the means to struggle successfully against alien species and chase them away from their own natural habitat, human beings too are naturally protected. Europeans may well travel to the limits of the inhabited world; they may well obtain easy victories against other people thanks to their advanced weapons, their knowledge, and especially the conviction they have of their ethnic superiority; yet, they will settle in certain places only die out or blend with the native race, physiologically and physically, to such an extent that it will be impossible to tell which of the two races has disappeared in the confusion of bloods".

Firmin (2002: 441) is of the view that "...the conclusions reached by anthropologists are therefore false as those articulated by the scholars and philosophers who have adopted or supported the doctrine of the inequality of the races. It becomes obvious, then, that the very presence of this doctrine contaminates any branch of human knowledge with contradiction and illogic, which infallibly leads the best minds and the most enlightened intellects to embrace the most absurd or monstrous ideas". In earnest, Firmin's observations are ideal starting points to recapitulate the various objections raised in terms of the superiority and inferiority of the species in order to destroy the very foundation of every method used to rank the human races; and that we are justified in asserting that all races are naturally equal. This equality is only upset when one particular race benefits from favourable evolutionary circumstances to achieve a level of development and acquire certain aptitudes not yet attained by others; but lest we forget that those now on the heights had to rise from an earlier stage of inferiority and we find both in the past and today, in various places around the globe, many of their congeners living in a state obviously reminiscent of that of their ancestors. It becomes necessary to return to the African racial menace and the fracturing of its identity to support Firmin's postulations in this discussion.

## **The African Racial Menace and Fracturing of its Identity**

The words tribe, native and race, along with many of the ideas associated with these terms, were first coined during the age of exploration, a time of European imperialism, exploration, technological superiority and colonization (Meltzer, 1993). As Europeans encountered people from different parts of the world, they speculated about the physical, social, and cultural differences among various human groups. The rise of the Atlantic slave trade, which gradually displaced an earlier trade in people from throughout the world, created a further incentive to categorize human groups to justify the subordination of the African enslaved (Smedley, 1999)

The term race or racial group, western scholars have made us to believe, refers to the categorization of humans into populations or groups on the basis of various sets of heritable characteristics (AAPA, 2010). This is typically the machinations of western scholars which Firmin has clearly refuted. To the western scholar conceptions of race, tribe, and native as well as specific ways of grouping them, varies by culture and over time and are controversial. The controversy ultimately revolves around whether or not the socially constructed and perpetuated beliefs regarding species in terms of tribe, native and race are biologically warranted as Firmin has logically refuted.

Julian the Apostate describes ancient Egyptians as highly intelligent and more given to crafts, and architecture (Michael & Olson, 2003). The classified concepts are assigned to differentiate people from one another, especially in the African continent and the rest of the world outside Europe by the colonialists and western scholars for the perpetration of their atrocities during the colonization period as Smedley (1993) correctly describes "... to justify the subordination of African slaves". Black African in White Europe will still be called Black Africa, or simply African (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/first/brace.html>) Assessed 10<sup>th</sup> November 2012.

More than ever before Africa has been used as a resort place for Western tourists and animal poachers; as a study place for various Western scholars, anthropologists and archaeologists. Africa has also been a job provider for Western missionaries, researchers and advisors who are eager to westernize Africa. The West has not ceased taking and receiving from Africa. Yet the picture that is painted is one of racial degradation, conflicts, a poverty-and-disease ridden continent that has little or nothing to offer the world ('humanity' my emphasis)" (Tedla, 1991: 48-50).

## **Who Made the Coloured People of Africa and the Rest of the World?**

Another theory worth examining briefly is the theory of the "coloured peoples" of the world. This derogatory concept has been added to the English dictionary after colonization. Unfortunately, the epistemology of the concept shames the colonialists and western scholars and for that reason has decided not to give it a prominent space in their writings in terms of the human species. Briefly, the colonialist coloured people are the direct off springs of the colonial African women subjects that they raped and impregnated.



Fearing that if these coloured people are accorded their rightful place as sons and daughter of the colonialists, their atrocities and exploitations could come to an abrupt end because they would not like to see their own children and grandchildren suffer. This is the gospel truth about the coloured people and you will find them in Europe and America but have not as yet been accorded their place as heirs of the Whiteman. This is not a matter of species and equality; rather it is a matter of absolute subjugation of the children of the colonialists (Boaduo & Gumbi, 2010).

## **African Contribution to Ancient Civilization and Development**

It is significant to recognise that the world is ordered according to the principle (doctrine) of the co-existence and the interaction of opposites on all levels of understanding, recognition and appreciation from the abstract to the concrete (Kamalu, 1990). Unfortunately, the European World (referred to as the West) has unthoughtfully divided and polarised these opposites creating a major rift in the world that is not European. On the most basic level there is the division between European and non-Europeans. There are also divisions between emotional and rational aspects of human beings, the arts and the sciences, man and woman and so-called civilized and primitive peoples. Anything that falls short of being European (the West) is classified as primitive or uncivilised (Tedla, 1991; Kamalu, 1990).

Fortunately, space is given to describing this *Concert of Opposites* in African philosophy. Encouragingly, it is an idea also found in Asian philosophies, notably Taoist principles of Yin and Yang (Kamalu, 1990).

Africa has distilled and encoded its experiences in science, philosophy, arts and heritage of its understanding of the world in countless ways. In brief, Africa's experiences are found encoded in its symbols, rituals, designs, artefacts, music, dances, proverbs, riddles, poetry, drum texts, architecture, technology, science and more importantly oral traditions (Tedla, 1991). The view of this list is that many of the listed items appear simple on the surface; it is not until one attempts to unravel the encoded philosophies or messages within them that one is struck by their profundity. The negative perceptions of African people by the West has led to the under-reporting, omitting, distorting or misinterpreting what is positive about Africa.

## **Colonialists Attempt to Fracture Africa's Image, Identity and Contribution to Civilization**

The history of colonization has got much for African people to learn from especially the concept of classification of species. Due to the tactical methodology of the colonialists which came to be popularly known as *divide and rule* has been applied from the colonial days to date. The colonialists invented racial categories of the species that were intended to perpetuate the stereotypes that some groups are more superior to others. African people were classified as Hamitic, Semitic, and Cushitic, Negroid, Neolithic or some other by European scholars who do not have the best interest of Africa and the rest of the world which is not part of Europe at heart.

These classifications of species became paramount during the Europeans scramble for and partitioning of Africa. All these were attempts by the colonialists to subjugate African people which enabled them to proceed to fracture African continental unity from then till today (Boaduo & Gumbi, 2010).

The classification of species into *Black* associated with African people leaves much to be desired because if the concept black means what it is supposed to be in the white man's dictionary, then African people are not black and neither can *White* be ascribed to Europeans because the colour white is different from the skin of Europeans. These divisions had created a rift among various population groups throughout the world. Africa has had its fair share of the degradation of human species identity by the European. How long do we wait to clarify these inconsistencies? This is what Anténor Firmin has laboriously done in his treatise "The Equality of the Human Races."

## Conclusion

Succinctly speaking, truth hurts however if truth is told at the most appropriate time to the most relevant people as Firmin has done, it sets them free and makes them change their attitudes and moral judgement to clarify inconsistencies and pacify those who have been offended. This article is a plain truth written by an African who feels that Africa has not been recognised by the western world and their scholars. Despite this, western scholars come into Africa in their thousands every year with the pretext that they are tourists. When, in fact, they are researchers who have come to collect their data for whatever purpose. The gospel truth is that whatever data they collect are more often than not misinterpreted to suit their views in order to be awarded a qualification or a price of some sort. It is high time western scholars who come to research in Africa revealed and told the truth as they found it in Africa. That is our plea and Anténor Firmin should be congratulated for his contribution towards the understanding of the issue of the human species dilemma. It is ideal to end this discussion with Firmin's words:

"...My wish is that this book (The Equality of the Human Races) will enlighten minds, inspire a sense of justice in all, and compel one and all to face reality"...and ... "the doctrine of the equality of the human races, which consecrates these rational ideas, thus becomes a regenerative doctrine, an eminently salutary doctrine for the harmonious development of the species. Ultimately, it evokes for us the most beautiful thought uttered by a great genius, "Every man is man" and the sweetest divine instruction, "Love one another" (Firmin, 2003).

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