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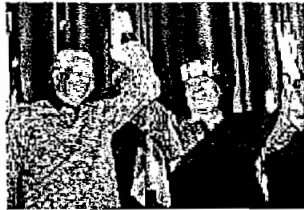


Photo: Libyan Leader Muammar Qaddafi with South African President Nelson Mandela 19 March 1999, at the end of their speeches at the Libyan parliament in Tripoli. Corbis Images

### “Libyans Are Africans”: Race and Identity in North Africa

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With its rolling sand-dunes and oases, imposing pyramids and minarets, North Africa has historically figured prominently in the African American imagination as an enchanting and exotic part of the African motherland. From Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple, a precursor of the Nation of Islam that traced the roots of African Americans to northwestern Africa, to [Afrocentrism's](#) insistence on the "blackness" of the Egyptian pharaohs, African Americans have long identified spiritually and intellectually with the civilizations of North Africa. African American culture is replete with references to North Africa: from Ella Fitzgerald's classic "Night in Tunisia" to Puff Daddy's video "Been Around the World," set in a desert kingdom and starring actress Jennifer Lopez as the capricious Princess of Tunisia.

But while African Americans have often identified with North Africa, and while Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi is a strong proponent of pan-Africanism, the recent violence against black Africans in Libya has forced many to wonder if most North Africans identify with other Africans.

The attacks in recent weeks against African migrant workers left 130 dead and sent thousands of Nigerians, Chadians, Ghanaians, Sudanese, and Nigerois (from Niger) fleeing to their home countries. Immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa have poured into Libya since Qaddafi began pushing for a United States of Africa and adopted a pan-African policy that eased visa and travel restrictions. Prior to the outbreak of violence, black African immigrants numbered almost 1 million of Libya's 6 million residents.

The violence was allegedly triggered by a dispute following a soccer match and rumors that a Nigerian had raped a girl in the town of Zawiyah. Many

have also attributed the violence to Libya's current economic crisis. Although Qaddafi's oil-rich nation has earned \$11 billion in oil sales this year, most Libyans live on government-set salaries of \$170 per month, and resent their leader's funneling of billions of dollars in aid to neighboring states to garner support for his grand plan of a United States of Africa, while government employees have not been paid in months and there is a shortage of schools and inadequate state services.

"As billions flowed out in aid, and visa-less migrants flowed in, Libyans feared they were being turned into a minority in their own land," reported an article in the *Economist* titled "Libya's Pogrom against Black Africans." "Church attendance soared in this Muslim state. So did crime, drugs, prostitution and reports of AIDS."

Economic duress aside, long-simmering racial tensions between Libyans and black Africans seem to have played a role as well. According to the *Economist* article, "A history of racism fanned the flames. Libyans were slave-trading until the 1930s and, under Italian colonial rule, they saw themselves as Mediterranean, calling Africans 'chocolatinos.' Black-bashing has become a popular afternoon sport for Libya's unemployed youths."

The racist attacks have been a major political embarrassment for Qaddafi, who has championed a borderless Africa with a single currency and governing body ever since African countries defied the UN embargo on Libya in solidarity with the North African nation. On September 1, on the anniversary of his rule, Qaddafi declared that "Libyans are Africans and Africans are Libyans." In light of subsequent events, it would appear that many of Qaddafi's compatriots do not share his views.

On October 9, after weeks of violence, Qaddafi launched an investigation into the attacks, calling the instigators "enemies of African unity." And Qaddafi promised to compensate nearly 10,000 deported sub-Saharan workers with \$20 million (although many deportees have accused their governments of pocketing their share of the money).

Despite the widespread violence against their citizens, African leaders who benefit from Qaddafi's largesse have been remarkably muted in their response to the killings. Nigerian Minister of Cooperation Dap Sarumi downplayed the violence, saying, "Most of the deportees are criminals or prostitutes who have become an embarrassment." Ghanaian president Jerry Rawlings, a Qaddafi ally, flew to Tripoli to visit Ghanaians held in camps "for protection," and flew home with hundreds of his countrymen in tow.

While the violence has often been explained as essentially a racial conflict, some observers disagree. "I think the violence was a backlash against immigration rather than racism," says Nadia Rasheed, a Sudanese master's student at Columbia University. "Many Libyans -- about a million -- are black, particularly in the south. But one-sixth of the country is now made up of immigrants. Portraying it as 'Arab versus black' violence is not accurate either, because there were many Sudanese Arabs who were also victims of violence.... So there's a problem with the media's labeling."

The recent violence has unsettled many pan-Africanists and re-opened old questions about the limits of pan-African fraternity as it applies to North Africans. The longstanding question of whether "Arab" North Africa is part of Africa is a debate often associated with two prominent African scholars, Wole Soyinka and Ali Mazrui.

Mazrui, creator of the award-winning documentary *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, has repeatedly underlined the cultural and geographical affinity between black Africa and the Arab world. "Indeed, there was a time when what we now call the Arabian peninsula was part and parcel of African physicality," he has written. "It is to these geophysical lessons of Afrabia that we must turn....It is arguable that some of the walls separating Africans from Arabs are as artificial as the divisions which separated Slavs from Germans in Europe. There has been much discussion about the artificiality of the Sahara Desert as a divide between Arab Africa and Black Africa. Even more artificial is the Red Sea as a divide."

Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel Laureate, on the other hand, has likened Mazrui to Qaddafi, calling both "alienated Africans" and referring to the Kenyan-born Mazrui as "brainwashed," "alien," and "Arab."

"The 'who is an African' question is not an agonizing one for me personally," Soyinka writes in his most recent book, *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness*, in which he argues that the measure of African identity is less a question of history than one of behavior and consciousness. "Does a first- or tenth-generation Moroccan or Algerian in the United States answer to 'African American'? Does he celebrate Kwanzaa or pursue soul food in preference to meze or couscous?"

The issue of racial identification has long been a contentious topic in Egypt. In 1984, Columbia Pictures launched a television series on the life of the then recently assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, which starred Louis Gossett, Jr. When the series was banned in Egypt, many speculated that the production had offended political and religious sensibilities, but *New York Times* journalist Judith Miller cited racial reasons. "Throughout his presidency, Mr. Sadat appeared particularly sensitive about his dark complexion, which prompted jokes and ridicule," she wrote. "The portrayal of Mr. Sadat as a black man has revived the issue of race in Egypt, where it is usually deeply submerged." Because of Egyptians' discomfort with Sadat's representation as a black man, Miller argues, national authorities chose to ban the film rather than confront the unsettling issues it raised.

Similarly, in 1989, a group called the Blacology Speaking Committee raised the issue of race in Egypt when they protested an exhibit of Ramses the Great in Dallas, Texas, claiming the presentation did not underline the pharaoh's blackness. The incident provoked a rare glimpse into the official stance of the Egyptian government when Abdel-Latif Abou-Ela, director of the Cultural Office of the Egyptian Embassy, published a widely-discussed response in the *Washington Post* titled "Egypt Says Ramses II Wasn't Black."

"They should not...involve us in this racial problem that I thought was solved and buried a long time ago," Abou-Ela wrote. "We are not in any way related to the original black Africans of the Deep South. Egypt, of course, is a country in Africa, but this doesn't mean it belongs to Africa at large. This is an Egyptian heritage, not an African heritage.... We cannot say by any means we are black or white."

While many North Africans are uncomfortable with identifying with darker-skinned sub-Saharan Africans, and while North African racial attitudes can sometimes erupt in violence as they did in Libya, some attitudes are changing. As issues of racial identity and pan-Africanism are discussed in North African countries, and as many North Africans come into greater contact with sub-Saharan Africans and African Americans, in Africa and

abroad, among many a sense of pan-African unity and common cause is growing.

Mostafa Hefny, an educator in Detroit, Michigan, drew attention when he contested the US Immigration and Naturalization Service's attempts to classify him as "white," as it does with all immigrants from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.

"My complexion is as dark as most Black Americans," he told *Jet* magazine in 1991. "My features are clearly African.... Classification as it is done by the United States government provides whites with legal ground to claim Egypt as a White civilization.... We are fools if we allow them to take this legacy from us."

Gamel Nkrumah, the son of Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah and an Egyptian mother, also often raises issues of race as a Cairo journalist, and has mobilized an Egyptian following for Mumia Abu-Jamal, the Pennsylvania death row inmate. And for sub-Saharan and North African soccer players who find themselves playing together on teams in sometimes hostile European cities, a sense of continental kinship often comes easily. When asked who his closest friend on his Spanish soccer team was, for example, Cameroonian goalkeeper Antoine Bell didn't hesitate. "Noureddin Naybet," he said, referring to a Moroccan defender. "Because he's African, like me."

Similarly, Moroccan goalkeeper Abdel-Karim Benzekri had a positive experience interacting with other African teams in Burkina Faso at the African Cup of Nations in 1998. "When we played in Burkina Faso, we loved it, we love the culture, we love the people, the music," he said, a gold medallion in the shape of the African continent dangling from his neck. "I'd die for Africa."

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