

# Hierarchies of Otherness: Racial Stereotyping in Inter-colonial Labour Migration and Military Expeditions

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In the traditional understanding, the concept of the 'Other' implies an underlying East-West dichotomy that is largely played out in the binary relationship between a colonial master and a colonized subaltern. Wherever this polarity is disrupted, there emerge hierarchical structures of inter-racial Othering between colonizer and (former) colonial subjects. This paper questions how, then, inter-colonial encounters shape racial stereotyping to construct hybrid hierarchies of Otherness between colonizer and contrasting subjects. Does the impact of one (post-) colonial subject being treated as 'white but not quite' engender a crisis of relational identity in the other subject? What are the pluralistic interrelations between a hegemonic 'white' power and its two very distinct—yet not so very different—Others? When Marie-Paule Ha states that the "question of who is subaltern and to whom is very complicated. The Western postcolonial practice of presenting all colonized as subalterns risks oversimplifying the rapports between different cultural groups" (Ha 1997, 159), she already indicates a disturbance of these oppositional correlations. Terry Goldie's chess board analogy of the indigene "as a semiotic pawn [...] under the control of the white signmaker" (Goldie 2006, 172) is likewise all too simplistic to contain the shades of grey that disrupt the basic dualism in the shape of a second colonized identity.

Judith Butler, in her discussion of sexual identity in *Bodies that Matter*, explores the idea that Otherness is both agentic and a matter of point of view by stating that "gay and lesbian identity positions [...] constitute themselves through the production and repudiation of a heterosexual Other" (Butler 1993, 112). The "limited usefulness of oppositional constructions" (van Pelt 2000, 141) is exposed when a third player enters the scene, turning the monogamous affair into a love triangle: Otherness is then revealed as a relative state in constant flux, where a centre wrestles with two peripheral contenders for the upper hand. Tamise Van Pelt's concept of *foundational difference* sheds some light on the power relationships seemingly at work in this scenario. She says that "[c]ivilized, superior Western white male heterosexual colonizers are foundationally privileged; we know in advance and without appeal to specific circumstance or historical context that this is so. Foundational difference [...] prescribes positions, inscribes hierarchy" (van Pelt 2000, 141). Hiring African

soldiers to fight a white war in an Asian setting, however, imposes a foundational difference upon two distinct Others of the white Self which is founded on a racial prejudice that conceives Africans as a martial race on the one hand, and tactical pragmatism on the other, but which at the same time neglects the intra-peripheral perceptions of the Others' mutual Otherness by proxy. In other words, the tensions arise from an *institutionalized* lack of foundational difference that—at least on the surface—grants black soldiers the same privileges and status as their white comrades, vis à vis their *imagined* and perceived role as the Other's Other. The army can thus be read as a liminal zone of cultural identification, where members of this specific population actually belong to or identify with, as Keith Hollinshead states, "several different geographic articulations or cultural spatialities simultaneously, and may respond paradoxically (for instance) to felt colonialist *and* to felt post-colonialist realities at the same time and juncture" (Hollinshead 1998, 126).

Since "imperialist discourse valorizes the colonized according to its own needs for reflection" (Goldie 2006, 173), the colonial rulers developed certain racial and ethnic stereotypes in connection with the suitability for certain kinds of labour. Criteria for the different treatment both in mind and body of Africans and Asians can be traced back to the characteristics ascribed to these peoples from the initial contact. Without the scientific concept of a written history in Western terms, the collective memory of orality pertinent to many African societies is bereft of its legitimizing powers in the eyes of the colonizer, since the European ideology of the historiographic truth is at odds with the mutable interpretations of traditional knowledge transfer. Europe, Dipesh Chakrabarty claims, "remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories [which] tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'" (Chakrabarty 1992, 1). The power ancient Greek sources retained over colonial perceptions of Asia as "refined and wealthy [...], dominated by centralized imperial monarchies with despotic forms of government" (Abbatisata 2011, 42) found no counterpart on the African continent. The single largest influence on the European mind and a fine example of Foucault's notion of discourse as power was the sizeable body of Victorian adventure stories, best-selling "nonfictional quest romances" depicting the continent as a dark place full of "bewitched or demonic savages" (Brantlinger 198, 176).

British officials firmly believed the Chinese—portrayed as hardworking, disciplined and productive—to be the better workers, and saw Africans as racially inferior: In Ineke van Kessel's words, "unskilled, indolent and unproductive" (van Kessel 2009, 53). Just like "India is valorized by its relationship to imperialist dynamics but it 'belongs' to the white realm only as part of the empire" (Goldie 2006, 174), black soldiers were valorized by their contribution to Western combative success without being accorded a place of their own in the empire other than as warriors. In a military context, they were cast as a 'martial race'

and in Indonesia, African soldiers reportedly held a higher position even than the Christian Amboinese, who were already privileged within the colonial army and were allowed to wear shoes, which was regarded as an element of European distinction.

The Dutch East India Company began employing “visible foreigners to apprehend fugitives and administer physical punishments” in the 18th century, thus using the ‘ultimate Other’ to assist bailiffs, dole out punishment, “apprehend escaped slaves and to act as disciplinaries. [...] On this account the Kaffirs were hated and feared by the slaves, and indeed by some whites” (van Kessel 2009, 58).

In the Caribbean, the British used Africans to crush slave rebellions as early as 1795. These so-called West India regiments initially consisted of slaves, preferably bought from the Guinea Coast or the Congo. After the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, recruits were largely liberated slaves that had been returned to Sierra Leone. Far from being treated as the former slaves they were, in the regiments they received the same uniforms and pay as white soldiers, and, as van Kessel points out, “as part of their training, it was impressed on the African soldiers that as servants of the British king their status was way above that of the slave population” (van Kessel 2009, 61). Despite their seemingly privileged position, the ‘white but not quite’ African soldiers were still bound by the ties of colour. According to David Killingray, “they might be diminished when the soldiers served in diluted units alongside British troops, but colour and race were the determinants as to what they could and could not do, and where they might or might not go. Many African soldiers, perhaps the majority, simply accepted the racial divisions associated with military service. This was simply a palimpsest of the colonial order” (Killingray 2010, 68). Although largely excluded from commissioned ranks, however, African senior soldiers could still hold positions of considerable influence in the colonial forces, as they were in charge of the daily management.

In his novel *Burma Boy* (2008), Biyi Bandele chronicles one of the forgotten stories of World War II: The involvement of a group of Nigerian soldiers who, serving under the so-called Chindits led by Major General Orde Wingate, operated deep behind enemy lines in Burma, using guerrilla tactics to pave the way for the larger forces. A recent documentary by Barnaby Phillips for the news channel *Al-Jazeera English* tracks the real-life story of a survivor of the regiment:

Strong, tough, most magnificently built race in the world, Negro soldiers march barefoot to their encampment. Africa fights for their cause, and ours. [...]

Britain, in its hour of need, took almost 1,000 African soldiers to fight in the distant jungles of Burma against the all-conquering Japanese. In 1942, the Japanese swept through Asia. The British retreated in chaos, and the jewel of the empire, India, was

under threat. In desperation, the British turned to Africa for reinforcements which could help push the Japanese back. (Phillips 2011, min. 6:00–6:57)

Having lied about his age to enrol in the army, Ali Banana, Bandele's naïve and endearing protagonist, is one of the reinforcements flown into the jungle to help D-section under Samanja Damisa in the besieged White City fortress to ward off Japanese assaults.

Samanja Damisa was Banana's hero. He was twelve years older than Banana and had been to more places and done more things than anyone Banana had met. He could say good morning and hello and what a lovely *panga* in Swahili, and many rude words in Italian, and you're so beautiful in Tigrinya and Amharic, and virtually anything he cared to say in English, barrack-French, market-Yoruba or town-Fulani. His mother tongue, which was also Banana's, was Hausa. (Bandeled 2008, 30)

'Samanya', or Sergeant Major, is actually a play on words—it is Sanskrit for 'general', but in the sense not of a military rank but rather meaning 'common, ordinary'. In Bengali, it still has the meaning of 'ordinary, common, insignificant, humble'. This refers back to the Muktika canon of 108 Upanishads, 21 of which are considered Samanya Vedanta Upanishads and are accepted by all Vedantic schools as *sruti*, or Hindu canonical texts of divine origin and as such one of the three main sources of dharma. At the same time, Samanya is an African Bantu first name meaning 'the unknown one'.

These African soldiers, or samanjas, are world-wise and well travelled, not unlike many Asians who went to study in the West. In accordance with contemporary racial prejudices of learning versus warfare, Asians were sent to university and Africans to the battlefield: "I was quite surprised at Kingi Joji's request and up till that night I'd never heard of this land called Boma. [...] all the other young men from Zaria [...] rushed to answer King Joji's call once they saw Ali and his two friends, home to show off a few weeks after joining the army, in their smart khaki drills" (Bandeled 2008, 43). Going to war for 'Kingi Joji' thus carries a similar cultural capital in the eyes of their fellow countrymen as studying in Europe—but also a corresponding (negative) reception by the 'native' Westerners and other colonial subjects. As van Kessel remarks, "Africans were the ultimate strangers, both in the European context as well as in the Asian colonial world. [...] In order to secure the loyalty of the African troops, they were often granted special benefits and privileges, which also served to enhance their status vis-à-vis civilian society. Thus, African troops from different ethnic backgrounds, and often of servile origins, acquired a sense of superiority over the civilian colonial subjects, as well as a new corporate identity" (van Kessel 2009, 60).

Army life may have constituted the first instance of direct contact with their Western

peers for many Africans, who in their majority were enlisted by native commissioners straight from their village. While certainly stimulating a profound questioning of both identity and belonging, individual responses were often enough characterized by a critical assessment of the benefits and advantages of new concepts, and their implementation underwent strict scrutiny and was moulded to fit pre-existing cultural habits. Ali Banana demonstrates this in a hilarious act of selective adaptation, when he eagerly embraces a new foreign army practice and simultaneously makes it his own by fashioning it to suit his taste:

[Ali] was so proud of his shoes, and so eager to show them off, he soon devised a better way to present them to his public: instead of wearing them on his feet—or rather, truth be told, because he found bare-footing much more comfortable—he took to hanging the boots by their laces around his neck. This proved so popular with the public that soon, and to the mild sorrow of the British officers, it became the fashion among the men to wear their shoes not on their feet but around their necks. In certain parts of Kaduna that year, a town where everyone knew someone who had been specially invited to Boma by Kingi Joji to teach the Japanese what’s what, no self-respecting young man of means would step on his Raleigh bicycle on a night out without his barrack-necklace, as it became known, shining from his neck. (Bandeled 2008, 44)

It was, however, not only their rather idiosyncratic approach to military conventions that prevented African soldiers from being fully integrated into the army corps, but also a language problem. As van Kessel indicates, the French model was in this sense advantageous over the Anglo-European one in that their subjects were forced to speak the colonizer’s language, whereas the Dutch and English could not guarantee that their soldiers had fully understood the disciplinary commands and instructions in the first place. It is worth quoting at some length from *Burma Boy* at this point. Having been dumped on a makeshift airstrip in the middle of the jungle, D-section is making their way towards White City, which has come under heavy bombardment from the Japanese.

“It’s only seventeen miles away,” [Samanja Show said.] “But there’s a little problem, a little mountain of a problem, between.”

“A little whathing, Jamees?” asked Samanja Damisa [...]. “Farabiti Ali no speak English. He no understand is what you say.”

“Don’t you?” Samanja Show asked the farabiti.

“Small-small,” replied Banana. He did understand what the British samanja had said. He just couldn’t yet speak the language. He now proceeded to translate what the sergeant had said, quite accurately, into Hausa, adding that he didn’t know what it

meant.

“You could have fooled me,” Samanja Show said in Barikanchi—a pidgin form of Hausa spoken in army barracks [...].

“What did the sergeant say to Banana?” Godiwillin—whose Hausa was good but not quite as good as Bloken’s—asked Bloken [...].

“I think there’s a problem along the way [...]. I don’t know what the nature of the problem is [...] but it’s on a mountain somewhere.”

“This is no time for jokes,” Godiwillin snapped.

“But Will, I wasn’t joking,” Bloken said seriously. “I’m telling you what I heard.”

(Bandeled 2008, 84-85)

In keeping with Spivak’s claim that the “project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolute Other into a domesticated Other that consolidated the imperialist self” (Spivak 1985, 253), language also becomes an element of valorization: This rare direct—that is, unmediated by bullets—encounter with the enemy once again marks the relativity and fickleness of alliances:

The Jap guns had gone all coy and D-Section were hoping to get an early night, when suddenly, out of the jungle, a Japanese voice called out.

“Black man!” rang the voice. “The white man is no friend of yours. The white man is your oppressor. Why are you dying for him? Leave him now. Let him fight his own war by himself.”

There was nothing unusual about the Japs hurling invective at their enemies. [...] What startled D-Section that night was that the Japs were speaking to them not in English but in perfectly accentless, unhesitant, impeccable Hausa. [...]

“The Japs may have intercepted some of our communication,” the kyafin told them. “There’s a great school in London called the School of Oriental Studies where many languages from all over the world are taught. The shehu who wrote the first Hausa kamus teaches there. That’s probably where the Jap learnt Hausa.”

(Bandeled 2008, 165-167)

This scene is one of the very few, if not the only, appearance of a Japanese character in a novel set on Asian soil yet otherwise devoid of Asians—a curious twist of the idea of absence as negative presence, where “the Aborigine is an essential non-participant” (Goldie 2006, 174) and is granted access only in the almost macabre form of a crazed, SOAS-educated (i.e. Westernized) madman.

The fact that the African soldiers seemingly didn’t always fully understand their mission

nor their enemy really does invite speculation as to the motives of their—note well, voluntary—joining up for the war effort. Ahmed Maiwada thus reads *Burma Boy* less as a coming-of-age story or an account of interracial conflict, but rather as a satire of man at war, told through the burlesque Hausa art form ‘Dan Kama, or comical pastiche, a depiction of the futility of warfare without real cause (Maiwada 2011): Banana “was a foot soldier fighting a crazy war he didn’t even really understand. He didn’t understand why King George was waging a war in Burma from far away England. And it didn’t matter to him. He was in Burma to fight King George’s war and that was the end of the matter. The Japs were King George’s enemies and that was the end of the matter. The Japs were his enemies. He would kill the Japs or the Japs would kill him. That was the end of the matter” (Bandeled 2008, 206).

For although throughout the novel the racial divide is not played out openly, in part, as Giles Foden suggests, “because the brutality and privation of fighting in Burma is a leveller of hierarchy” (Foden 2007), Bandele nevertheless insinuates that in reality, the Africans were chosen not so much for their capabilities and characteristics but rather because they were disposable:

They say he [Major Wingate] wanted Nigerians because in Somaliland and Abyssinia he saw that we were brave fighters and hard-working men. I do not know if the story is true, but I like to think it is. Consider this: of the six brigades that form the Chindits the only one that’s not made up of men from England or Scotland, or made up of Americans, is our very own Thunder, the 3rd West African Brigade. (Bandeled 2008, 70)

Disposable, and frightening. Indeed, in their interviews with Barnaby Phillips, many retired Japanese soldiers express their feelings of awe when confronted with these huge, muscular black men, so very different in stature and physique from their own people. Hamilton Smith, a serviceman with the British West Indies Regiment for twelve years, records that he “saw no danger whatsoever of fraternisation between Africans and Asians, as he believed that Asians regarded Africans as cannibals” (van Kessel 2009, 62).

The women, however, seem to have had a slightly different view. A former corporal who has seen action in Burma reveals that “[in] most towns we were given food by our concubines but not openly” (BBC Africa Service. Mustafa Bonomali, translated from Chichewa by A. Mwamkenenge, Malawi, 1989; cited in Killingray 2010, 108). According to an official report, there were attempts to keep black soldiers from mingling with white women, and often there were fights over them. “Sexual relations across the colour line challenged racial concepts regarding the sanctity of white womanhood and the notions of white superiority upon which colonial rule was based. This posed a potential threat to

colonial order, and certainly to white supremacy in South Africa.” (Killingray 2010, 110).

The vague promise of fulfilment of basic human needs within a new social order innate in these interactions was not limited to social acceptance and emotional attention but manifest also on the plane of professional development. Living and fighting with their white comrades will inevitably have brought out certain aspirations and a desire for equality. Yet while the French Army had several Senegalese officers and the British started to commission Indian officers as early as 1919, black Africans were long denied promotion. This practice was bound to cause great dissent, as West African troops “observed hundreds of Indian commissioned officers who live on terms of equality with their British colleagues; they know of only one African commissioned officer. This must inevitably encourage them to desire similar opportunities and wider educational facilities which will enable them to realise these ambitions” (Killingray 2010, 88).

“According to the King’s Regulations in 1938, King’s commissions in the armed forces could only be given to those of ‘pure European descent’, which excluded even black Britons born and brought up in the United Kingdom” (Killingray 2010, 85); from 1940, when this decree was challenged, a few black officers were appointed for the duration of the war only; preferential treatment was given to university educated doctors, or members of local royal families. At the same time, according to contemporary reports, ‘mixing with the white population on almost equal footing [while in Europe] has made an impression on the mind of the African—and if care is not taken, might have unfortunate repercussions not so much in his homeland, but in the neighbouring European states where 70% of these men find employment” (TNA, DO 35/1183/Y 1069/1/1, ‘Report on African and colonial troops employed with British Forces’, 3 January 1944).

Andrea Levy poignantly describes these very consequences in her novel *Small Island* (2004), which captures the defining moment of direct contact with the Mother Country of the first generation of Jamaican immigrants. Having fought for Britain during the war, Gilbert returns on the *SS Windrush* to a cold welcome: He takes up residence in the crumbling attic of his impoverished white landlady Queenie, whose husband Bernard had long been lost in battle. Village snob Hortense, Gilbert’s new wife, soon joins him in the squalor of post-war London only to realise that the textbook picture colonial education had painted for her is a far cry from her new reality. Fresh off the boat, Hortense “looks down her nose at working-class Queenie, and firmly rejects the notion that she has anything in common with the other slum-dwelling migrants” (Phillips 2004).

It soon dawns on her, however, that her light skin and teacher-training college qualifications count for nothing in post-war Britain, in what Irene Pérez Fernández calls the shattering of the idea of the Mother Country. Both Hortense and Gilbert feel a certain ownership over the place where they are “socially constructed as the ‘Other’” (Pérez

Fernández 2009, 149), and the disappointment this rejection causes cuts deep:

Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. [...] Then one day you hear Mother calling—she is troubled, she need your help. [...] Leave home, leave family, leave love. [...] The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. [...] Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after the journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, “Who the bloody hell are you?” (Levy 2004, 139)

Instead of the gratefulness and respect they feel due to them by virtue of their dedication and filial piety, they are met with rancour and disdain by a “bad, uncaring and selfish mother” (Pérez Fernández 2009, 149).

The ambiguity of hierarchical positions on a global scale is already immanent in the title. *Small Island* toys with the idea that Jamaicans consider themselves superior to their Caribbean neighbours of lesser size and import, or in Gilbert’s words: “We Jamaicans, knowing our island is one of the largest in the Caribbean, think ourselves sophisticated men of the world” (Levy 2004, 131). After the experience of Britain and the War, however, Gilbert is hit by “the awful realisation that, man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!” (*ibid.*, 196). Ironically, he mirrors Bernard’s perception of his own homeland, who upon his return proclaims: “England had shrunk. It was smaller than the place I’d left” (*ibid.*, 424).

The perceived threat of the black Other on home soil in an environment of political instability and social upheaval—Levy’s novel is set at the intersection between the loss of imperial standing through Indian independence and the uncertainties of the impending Suez crisis, in a country already dilapidated and exhausted from the war effort—resonates with Goldie’s reconceptualization of Jan Mohamed’s manichean allegory as “not that of good and evil [but rather] between the ‘putative superiority’ of the indigene and the ‘supposed inferiority’ of the white”. As Gilman puts it, the insufficient difference between Self and Other calls for the creation of an imaginary yet dynamically alterable line, which eventually allows for those “paradigm shifts in our mental representations of the world [...]. We can move from fearing to glorifying the Other. We can move from loving to hating” (Gilman 1985, 18).

In the words of Francesca Giommi, *Small Island* “describes the first dynamic encounter between the former colonizers and the colonized in a sort of ‘colonization in reverse’: those ‘imperial Others’ who once lived in remote marginal colonies, are now demanding inclusion and belonging on British soil, ‘invading’ public national and private family spaces” (Giommi

2008, 4). At a time when Britain's imperial dominance is dwindling abroad, the white population at home is forced to renegotiate their sense of self within their own spatial location when faced for the first time with Black immigrants on their own turf. Eventually returning home from Burma over a year after his demob, the stubbornly racist Bernard voices the English predicament of now having to come up against the spirits they have cited:

The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these coloured people. [...] I fought a war to protect home and hearth. [...] Everyone was trying to get home after the war to be with kith and kin. Not so these blasted coloured colonials. I've nothing against them in their place. But their place isn't here. (Levy 2004, 469)

Gilbert's reply speaks to a humanist undercurrent which cannot be voiced clearly enough even today:

We both just finish fighting a war—a bloody war—for the better world we wan' see, and on the same side—you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? (Levy 2004, 525)

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