

# But the Man Does Not Throw Bones

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## **Abstract**

From time immemorial some African peoples associated bodily and spiritual healing with their relationship with the living-dead and communication with them. The use of selected animal bones by a special healer was one of the means of communication with the living-dead in the process of determining the cause of illness and receiving advice on its cure. This practice endures in some parts of Africa today. Our cane spirit- addicted white boss incurred the wrath of his white colleagues in the South Africa of the seventies by submitting himself to medical examination by a Western-trained Bantu medical practitioner operating in a Bantustan. In defence of his decision our white boss declared: 'But the man does not throw bones!' By this he contrasted the bones to the stethoscope; the latter being the symbol and reality of the assumed superiority of Western medicine over African ways of healing based on African culture. At the same time he challenged the racism of his time by accepting that he could be examined by a Bantu medical doctor. The purpose of this essay is to examine the ensuing epistemological and cultural tension between the bones and the stethoscope, and argue that the tension is based on different and contending paradigms of healing, none of which has prior and unquestionable superiority over the other. This argument is reflected in part by the somewhat unconventional style of our presentation, that is, storytelling, as a way of challenging the contentious dogma that there is only one 'science'.

**Keywords:** bones, experience, epistemology, knowledge, racism, psychology, tension, science, stethoscope.

## **Introduction**

The point of departure for the paper is that all ways of knowing and doing aim to understand experience so that it can be used to ameliorate, strengthen and

protect especially human life on earth. The pursuit of this aim under the guise of 'science' has resulted in the exclusion of other ways of knowing and doing and the classification as well as the hierarchisation of the human race in terms of 'superior' and 'inferior' on the one hand, and the elevation of 'science' to the position of judge as to what constitutes 'objective' knowledge on the other. Unsurprisingly, feminist epistemology, for example, has questioned both the classification and hierarchisation of the human race and the elevated status of 'science', together with its claim to 'objectivity'. This paper is written as a critique of the exclusion of other ways of knowing and doing. It is a contribution to the unfolding challenge to the classification as well as the hierarchisation of the human race into 'superior' and 'inferior', and it questions the dogma of one 'science' as the sole claimant to 'objectivity'. As part of the challenge the paper is written deliberately in the form of a story, a real story to which the writer was witness, in order to underline the point. Other ways of knowing and doing, excluded by 'science', have advanced the triple aim of the amelioration, strengthening and protection of human life. They are therefore worth listening to. Like history which for a long time has remained 'his-story' the time has come for it to recognise 'her-story' if it wants to make a credible claim to the elusive criterion of 'objectivity'. Similarly, it is now time to listen to the stories of the marginalised.

First will be the contextualisation of the story. The context is racism in South Africa inaugurated by the unjust wars of the colonisation of the country. There certainly is no attempt in the paper to provide a comprehensive history of colonial racism in South Africa. Only an outline of selected features of this history relevant to the story will be highlighted. Second will be the story itself. Although the author is reporting on a true story, care has been taken to avoid mentioning the identity of specific places and persons. It does not follow from this that the story is fictitious. The third step will be an analysis of the story. The language and style of writing here will be somewhat different from that through which the story was narrated. Even so, care shall be taken to avoid technical language so that the analysis will hopefully be comprehensible to most of the readers. The analysis will be followed by the fourth step, the conclusion.

## **The Context**

It was in 1972 when the unjustified privileges of colonial racism seemed im-

mutable and the granite structure of the apartheid construction seemed eternal. In those days there was no need to ask who was the boss at work. It was known that skin colour determined one's destiny. Those born with pink skins were mysteriously defined as white. Surely, their skin colour was not like white chalk! The definition did not quite fit the ordinary perception of the colour pink. And yet, pink is the colour that seemed an appropriate description of those privileged human beings in South Africa. There was tension between the definition 'white' and the description 'pink'. The same tension was extended to the indigenous peoples of South Africa conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation. These peoples were defined as black. Yet, some of them had a taint of brown, while others indeed were as black as soot. How does one explain this option to ignore or misinterpret accurate description in preference for a definition which has only a dubious connection with the object it claims to define? Part of the answer lies in colonised South Africa's apparently novel ascent to colour-oriented reasoning with regard to human beings.

In the aftermath of colonial conquest, the distinction between coloniser and colonised was maintained by identifying the latter as 'natives' or 'Non-Europeans'. This was subsequently abolished, apparently because it reminded the 'European' coloniser that its claim to title of the conquered territory was questionable. And so, the colonised were now identified as the Bantu and the coloniser as white. The Black consciousness philosophy contributed towards the political rejection of the identification Bantu in preference to black (Biko 2003). The rejection was not recognised by the rulers of South Africa as their intellectual alliance focused on colour-oriented reasoning. Why was this so? The focus upon colour-oriented reasoning does not necessarily originate from the same experiences in the same life-worlds giving rise to inevitably shared norms and moral values. For the Black Consciousness philosophy, the term black was an existential index pointing to all peoples oppressed and discriminated against by the successors in title to colonial racism in South Africa. It is precisely this meaning that the rulers of the country objected to, and so they did not regard the Black Consciousness philosophy as an intellectual ally. Instead, they considered it a threat to the dominant political ideology of apartheid. It was in the context of this social and political situation in 1972 that I was employed as a clerk in the Department of Bantu Administration and Development. I was located in Bophuthatswana Bantustan, also known as a Bantu homeland. Together with other colleagues, we were working under a white boss with the official designation of Superintendent.

I will use the terms white and black for ease of communication, but bear in mind the tension between description and definition. I use them also to underline their vital importance in the construction and constitution of social and political relations between the peoples so defined. Their importance is vital since it ultimately touches upon the question of justice in South Africa and human relations in general where colour-oriented reasoning is the regulative principle.

### **Our White Bosses**

We had many and different white male bosses, each with their own idiosyncracies. However, they were united in the belief that being white qualified them naturally to be the superiors of blacks. Thus they understood their occupational mission to be the development of the Bantu peoples by giving them training that would change them into objects quite close to human beings. They deliberately maintained an eccentric comportment to ensure the necessary distance between themselves and the objects of their training. They hardly smiled or laughed except when they came together every Wednesday lunchtime to have their *braai*, that is, hard porridge (*pap*) with meat or some special sausage rolls known locally as *boerewors*. We were not sure if their stomachs were the same as ours, despite the fact that they contained the very *pap* which was our staple food. By chance we got to know that some had wives and others partners. They never talked about their other halves, probably because of the Immorality Act then in force. We could not resist the thought that perhaps their studied silence on their spouses or lovers was based on the mythical fear that the libidinous, licentious sexuality of the black males could enable them to rape their beloved from whatever distance. Seemingly, it did not occur to them that despite the Miscegenous Marriages and Immorality Acts, their ancestors had long recognised the colonised as human beings by impregnating indigenous black women, perhaps even by rape. The children born of such sexual copulation were neither ants, lizards, whales nor elephants. Instead, they were wholesome human beings second to none. Yet, colour-oriented thinking preferred to baptise them as 'Coloured'. This identification preserved the illusion of the purity of being white. It ensured that whites would avoid paying *lobola* (dowry), thereby denying themselves the status of being sons-in-law to blacks.

As one white boss was replaced by another, I ventured to ask one of them exactly when we would be fully trained to become Superintendents. Invariably, each replied that this would happen ‘after ten years’. Having heard this refrain so frequently, I decided to ask if we were to start counting anew as each one of them came or should we rather continue from where we left off when the predecessor departed. I was told rather curtly that I should avoid politics.

Then came another new white boss. He did not make any secret of his excessive love for cane spirit. He gulped it each day like a hungry baby clutching at its mother’s breast for milk. One of his vaunted credentials for being a Superintendent was his experience in the gold mines where he learnt *Fanakalo*, the special language of the mines. Whenever he made a suggestion, he asked, ‘What does your *umhlizo* say,’ meaning, what is your feeling about it? By this he illustrated his knowledge of *Fanakalo*. I often wondered if he understood the philosophical meaning of this term, the heart, among the Bantu-speaking or Yoruba peoples (Eniyan 2003). As he rattled another *Fanakalo* expression, ‘*four nyao six mabele*’, and told us it means a female prostitute, I pondered if he understood that poverty as structural political and economic violence could condemn a decent lady to wear skirts without underwear (Althaus-Reid 1998). In the meantime, the cane spirit consumption took its toll and one good Wednesday, our white boss fell ill. This did not halt preparations for the routine *braai*.

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Our white boss requested that a doctor be found right in the township, to attend to him. One of my colleagues undertook the search for a doctor. The first doctor refused to come, claiming that he could not by law examine a white person. The second one obliged and was chauffeured by our colleague to the patient. As the medical examination was going on in private in the office of our white boss, another young Superintendent came for a chat with his colleague. We told him please not to enter the office, but he did not even have the decency to ask why we made such a request. He knocked casually on the door and entered before he got the come in response. Lo and behold! The unimaginable spectacle of seeing a white man being examined by a black medical doctor! He staggered back as if planet Earth was out of joint. He suddenly looked old, trying to overcome the swoon arising from the vision of a white man examined by a

black medical doctor. Without a word he drove away, apparently to contemplate the mystery of this spectacle.

Meanwhile, the black doctor completed his examination and provided appropriate treatment. He was then driven back to his surgery. Our white boss slept. Hardly an hour after the departure of the young Superintendent another one came for a visit, evidently informed about the mystery. No talk with us. He opened the door and found our white boss asleep. Before he could leave, the Senior Superintendent arrived. They walked outside and after a brief discussion, decided to ask us what happened. We gave them the information. After a while the Senior Superintendent returned alone and informed us that we could have the food for their routine Wednesday *braai*. Few would refuse a delicious free lunch. We were grateful for the opportunity to save some money since we were acutely aware that we were, as black people, purposely but seriously underpaid.

Under the influence of hysterical, irrational anger, the Senior Superintendent compromised conviction to convenience. He called the black district medical surgeon and asked him to examine our white boss. Underlying this frenzy was the rational intention to have our white boss dismissed if he were to be certified drunk during working hours. The district surgeon called his colleague. After their discussion he reported to the Senior Superintendent that it was unnecessary to re-examine the patient unless expressly requested to do so by the patient himself. Furthermore, he informed the Senior Superintendent that the medical condition of our white boss was a confidential matter between himself and the doctor who examined him. Frustration turned the Senior Superintendent to contact the police, asking them to find out if a charge could be laid against the black doctor who examined our white boss. But the police were not lawyers, and so they could not provide him with a specific law under which the black doctor could be charged.

By the time the accountant came to collect money from our office, our white boss was slightly awake. The accountant decided to engage him in discussion showing that it was wrong for him to have submitted himself to medical examination by a black doctor. The discussion turned into a debate. Their voices grew louder and heavier as the debate intensified. Our white boss finally declared in his native Afrikaans, '*Maar die man gooi nie dolosse nie!*' (but the man does not throw bones). The seventh edition of the *Explanatory Afrikaans Dictionary* states that '*dolosse*' means 'the knee bone of an animal used by witchdoctors to foretell events'. The declaration of our white boss did

not close the debate. Instead, it cast into sharp relief the contrast between the bones and the stethoscope. The former was regarded as the symbol and the reality of 'non-science' (Horton 1970), 'magic' (Jarvie & Agassi 1970), and 'witchcraft', whereas the latter was the veritable symbol and, indeed, the reality of 'science' and 'rationality'. This contrast raises a number of questions deserving the attention of scholars. I propose to turn to some of the questions.

### **Analysis: The Tension between Description and Definition**

I have already suggested that colour-oriented thinking seemed, and only seemed, to be a novelty in South Africa. One of the points of the suggestion is that colour-oriented thinking as well as the classification and hierarchisation of human beings has deep roots in the Western philosophical tradition. The tradition spans from Aristotle through to the Enlightenment (Outlaw 1996), to Modernity and right into our time (Ramose 1999). Armed with Aristotle's famous definition of 'man' as 'a rational animal', colonisation preferred a restricted interpretation of this so that the peoples of Africa, the Amerindians and the Australasians were excluded. The effect of the exclusion was to render these peoples subhuman and therefore deserving of slavery. The same definition was used to establish the subordination of women to men (McMillan 1982). The violence of colonisation and the enslavement of the colonised were justified on the questionable Western philosophic classification and hierarchisation of human beings. The literary world assisted this endeavour through its use of the terms white and black. The former was construed as the symbol and the reality of purity, goodness, brightness and even superiority, while the latter was interpreted as ugliness, darkness, inferiority and even sinfulness or evil, theologically. It is this philosophical tradition that was implanted in South Africa at colonisation. Although the terms 'native', 'non-European' and 'Bantu' were used initially, this did not detract from the Western philosophical tradition on race. The ascent to the use of the term white in South Africa was thus the implantation and affirmation of the tradition of philosophical and practical racism. No wonder, then, that our white bosses assumed that ontologically they were superior to us.

From the declaration of *Sublimis Deus* that 'all men are rational animals' (Hanke 1937), 'The Declaration on the Rights of Man' in France, somewhat oblivious of the rights of women (de Gouges 1983), through to the

United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, including the contemporary veneration of 'human rights', the ancient virus of racism subsists with seeming immortality. These declarations affirmed the necessity to eliminate racism and the oppression of women. This is yet to be realised even in the 'new' post-1994 South Africa, with its putative 'non-racial' constitution. Accordingly, this moral imperative to eliminate racism and the oppression of women is a continuing challenge to scholars. The question here is whether or not colour-oriented thinking is necessary or desirable. The answer I prefer is stated by Outlaw in these terms:

For me, raciality and ethnicity (and gender) are constitutive of the personal and social being of persons, thus are not secondary, unessential matters: they make up the historically mediated structural features of human life-worlds and inform lived experience. Further, they have both absolute (i.e., in themselves) and relative (i.e., in relation to other racial, ethnic, gender groups) value *to the extent that, and for as long as, persons take them to be constitutive of who they are.* ... In searching for new terrain and terms on and through which to fashion new theoretical and practical agendas, I am committed to two basic beliefs. First, that a full appreciation of what it means to be human requires that we take proper note of human groupings the definitive characteristics of which are constitutive, in varying degrees, of the persons in the group. Second, that the principles on which we would base both the organization of socio-political life, and those intellectual enterprises whose objects are living human beings, must take explicit account of these constitutive differences (Outlaw 1996: 174).

Significant prior attempts to deal with the question whether or not colour-oriented reasoning is necessary or desirable have been made both in South Africa and elsewhere. For example, in South Africa the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act No 24 of 1995) was enacted. It was an effort to eliminate colour-oriented thinking and replace it with 'non-racialism', thereby achieving one of the aims of the 1996 constitution. The body established by the Act referred to is commonly known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It is curious that the formal wording of the Act does not contain the term 'truth', and yet the Commission based on this

Act is known more by the term ‘truth’ rather than ‘national unity’. It is also odd that the term ‘truth’ was preferred to ‘justice’ (Mamdani 2002). The preference is ahistorical and a somewhat arbitrary choice of ‘truth’.

### **Analysis: The Bones and the Logic of Exclusion**

The Afrikaans dictionary already referred to explains ‘*dolosse*’, the bones, in relation to what it terms the ‘witchdoctor’. According to this explanation, the ‘witchdoctor’ is a participant in witchcraft (Oluwole 1992). The underlying presupposition here is that witchcraft is distinguishable from, and is therefore not ‘science’. On this distinction, the black doctor who examined our white boss was the true doctor by virtue of his training and assimilation into the Western paradigm of science. He was not a ‘witchdoctor’ who, by necessity of a false white superiority complex, is excluded from ‘science’. Of course, the white superiority complex appreciates magic, superstition or witchcraft only when oracle Paul (*Pretoria News* 2010), a white, predicts the winning teams of the FIFA 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

This logic of exclusion in the name of white superiority permeates all relations between blacks and whites, but it falters in the sphere of human sexuality. In the sphere of religion, classification and hierarchisation occurs, identifying some as ‘World religions’ (Kung 1997), and others as sheer experiences of ‘pagan superstition’. This rather transparent attempt to preserve the myth of white superiority must be tempered with the recognition that ‘God’, however conceived, is never a scientific probability, but only a metaphysical necessity (Gilson 1941).

In the domain of ‘science’ the logic of exclusion speaks to deficient democracy in the construction of knowledge. The systematic and sustained exclusion of other sites of knowledge and peoples renders the knowledge acquired and elevated to the status of ‘science’ unrepresentative. Mindful of the fact that, ultimately, ‘science’ is a mutable conventional agreement on what is reasonable and acceptable (Nagel 1959), the unrepresentative, undemocratic character of the Western scientific paradigm undermines its claim to science and the hallowed criterion of objectivity. Democratising knowledge and science means the practical recognition of the *sangoma*, *ngaka*, *chiremba* or *nyanga* as authentic doctors in their own right, doing so in terms of their healing paradigm second to none. On this reasoning, the identification,

‘traditional healer’, is somewhat inept and rather infelicitous. So it is that the idea of one ‘science’, and only one ‘science’, becomes the apotheosis of a false universalism and an abstract essentialism (Northrop 1947). To cure this defect it is vital to strive consciously for democratisation in the construction of knowledge and science. The pursuit of this goal must be tempered with some caveats.

First, it is crucial to remember that even in the natural sciences, ‘objectivity’ can be compromised, as Lysenkoism has shown. In our time, we have echoes of Lysenkoism in, for example, the contest between ‘star wars’ and ‘star peace’ in the sphere of nuclear armament. ‘Star wars’ and ‘star peace’ cannot be possible at the same time by the very same scientific methods using the same means or data.

Second, it is important to remember the arguments for the de-establishment of science. These, unfortunately, have not carried the day. As a result, science and the educational enterprise as a whole are, to a large extent, under the firm grip and control of the interests of money. The surreptitious transition from democracy (Hertz 2001) to timocracy has to a very large extent placed knowledge and science under the supreme governance of money. This contemporary condition is reminiscent of Protagoras (Ajei & Ramose 2008), but this time we must invert his insight and declare that ‘money is the measure of all things, of life that is that it may die and of things that are not that they may come to be’. In this situation, the life-worlds of the rich and the poor, symbolised and coloured in black and white, will subsist into the indefinite future.

## **Conclusion**

Racism is not automatically and necessarily the reason for colour-orientated thinking defining human beings as blacks or whites, even Coloureds or mulattos. Life-worlds as sites where human beings live and die are the seedbeds of experiences giving rise to norms and values including colour-oriented thinking. The attempt to eliminate life-worlds merely by assimilating them into a false universalism and an abstract essentialism is unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, the insistence upon one science and, only one science undermines the very idea of science by suppressing representativity and compromising the criterion of objectivity. Accordingly, the bones are neither

superior nor inferior to the stethoscope. Both are simply different ways of healing human illnesses.

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